

The End of a War

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Summary: Truth has taken the Forerunner ship and is on his way to the Ark. Keyes and Johnson have stopped Installation 05 from firing, but the failsafes have been activated. Janissary James and the others on Earth are ready to take the fight to the Covenant.

1. The End of a War Prologue

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The End of a War

A Halo-based piece of FanFiction written by Mr. Clark

A/N: Just a quick side-note, this takes place following the end of the Halo 2 video game, so if you haven't played the game and want to keep all the wonderful story developments unspoiled, then don't read this.

Prologue

The Beginning |um |Actually the Middle

Tartarus swung his massive battle hammer in a wide arc, slamming it onto the ground a hairs-breadth away from where the Arbiter stood. Snarling viciously, Tartarus pivoted his feet and leaned his shoulder downwards. Moving faster than his bulk would suggest he was capable of, he slammed into the Elite and sent him crashing into one of large structures that were littered about in the chamber. Following through, he used his forward momentum, charged the hammer, and thrust it towards the fallen Elite.

The Arbiter felt the distortion the energy peeling off Tartarus' hammer a moment before it discharged. Grasping a human firing weapon in his left hand he pushed off the ground and threw himself to the right, saving himself from being slammed into the stone monument when

the influx of energy impacted. Shaking the cobwebs from his head, the Arbiter grabbed his bearings and slowly regarded the leader of the Brutes.

That hammer Tartarus touted was powerful enough to not only send him flying across the chamber with one good hit, but it was also emitting a shield that protected the Brute from harm. The Arbiter was confident he could defeat Tartarus simply by outsmarting him, but that would take time, something he did not have much of. The Holy Ring was almost ready to fire, which would mean the deaths of every single organism capable of sustaining the parasite. There would be no time for outsmarting Tartarus once that happened.

The Arbiter caught sight of several Elites preparing to jump onto the structure that held Tartarus and himself. The others that had faced Tartarus already had been beaten down by the Brutes' hammer, a fate he did not wish to see bestowed upon anyone else.

"Hold your positions!" the Arbiter bellowed in his native tongue. The Elites stopped their charge and stared down at the Arbiter in confusion. Satisfied that they would not join the battle, the Arbiter turned his gaze on the human soldier, the one that had piloted the Scarab. He held a Jackal Rifle in his hands. The weapon was powerful enough to pierce any shielding ever created, but it required a steady hand and a light touch.

"Human, do you know how to use that gun?" the Arbiter shouted at Sergeant Johnson. Despite the situation, Johnson felt a smirk light up his face.

"Let me tell you something Mr. Arbiter," he said sarcastically, "there isn't a weapon known to mankind that I don't know how to shoot. I've hit the wings off Drones with this little number in my sleep!"

The Arbiter returned his gaze to Tartarus, who was preparing to charge once again.

"Then show me."

Tartarus shouted once again as he rushed towards the Arbiter. Before either could comprehend what was happening, three plasma shots raced by, slamming into Tartarus' chest. The white shield that had once covered his body faded, and the Arbiter's brain kicked into gear.

The Brute had yet to stop his charge, and was within a few feet from the Arbiter when he swung. Ducking swiftly, the Arbiter avoided the hammer, brought the human pump-handled weapon to bear, and waited for Tartarus to close the gap between them. Bringing the shotgun up, he pressed it against the Brute's thick chest and fired.

Brutes were known for their muscle density. A rampaging Brute could take a whole clip from a human sub-machine gun and keep going. There had even been reports that some Brutes had survived after being hit by a human land-roving vehicle at speeds that would render all other species incapacitated.

None of that mattered, for the one weapon that the humans continued to use with dominance against the Covenant in close quarter fighting

held up to its reputation. Two buck-shot rounds entered the Brute's chest cavity and promptly made a mess before exiting out its backside.

Tartarus felt his grip weaken on his hammer, and dropped it as he fell forward. Before he could collapse on top of the Arbiter, the Elite fell onto his back and brought his legs up, kicking the Brute up and over himself to land roughly, and several feet away. Tartarus managed a strangled curse before he felt the light begin to fade and finally disappear altogether.

The Arbiter slowly got off the ground, his legs burning from the exertion of lifting Tartarus. He leaned against one of the tall structures in an attempt to catch his breath. It was a moment before he remembered that he had killed Tartarus for a reason, a big reason. Snapping his gaze to the collecting energy in the center of the chamber, the Arbiter saw the female human leap down upon the firing mechanism and remove the Icon. A sigh of relief escaped him, until he felt the control room begin to tremble.

'Were we too late?' The thought resonated through the Arbiter's mind when the chamber began to shake violently, throwing him off his feet. As quickly as it came, the disturbance left, leaving only silence inside the control room. Where the human had removed the Icon, was now a hologram of some sorts.

"What's that?" the female human asked the Oracle.

"A beacon," it responded simply.

"What's it doing?" the female questioned.

"Communicating at super luminous speeds."

"With what?"

"The other installations."

The Arbiter felt his head throb as he slowly got to his feet. He started over to where the two humans and the Oracle stood.

"The other installations are now prepared for remote activation," the Oracle explained in response to something the humans had asked.

"From here?" the female asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," the Oracle replied in a patronizing tone. That seemed to get the human soldier riled up.

"Listen tinkerbelle, don't make me-" his response was cut off by the human female as she waved him off.

"Then where? Where would someone go if they wanted to activate the other rings?"

"Why, the Ark of course," the Oracle replied as if it was supposed to be common knowledge. The Arbiter walked between the two humans and regarded the Oracle.

"And where, Oracle, is the Ark?" the Arbiter inquired.

If there was one thing John 117, otherwise known as the Master Chief, truly despised, it would have to be fighting in space. The thought of being blown to bits by some orbital fire without so much as the chance to pull the trigger on his weapon made him feel vulnerable in a way that should not have been possible. If he had his way, the Covenant would not fight their battles in space, instead they would land their ships on whatever planet that was in their way, and engage the enemy from on the ground. Fighting on the ground with dirt beneath his feet was the only way to fight a war.

Unfortunately, the Covenant preferred to stay in orbit around a planet, and burn it into cinder and then finish 'glassing' it with plasma fire from their fleet. Because of this, it was inevitable that John would be forced to fight the majority of the time in space.

Not that he was useless when it came to fighting off the ground. The Master Chief had been trained since the age of six in nearly every form of combat known to humankind. The destruction of the 'Unyielding Hierophant' was proof enough of this.

Now though, he wished that he wasn't on the Forerunner ship, and was instead down on Earth, fighting against the Covenant forces. That was his luck though, he always got the more interesting missions.

Some radio chatter caught his attention and he recognized one of the voices as Lord Hood, commander of the orbital defense guns that were positioned to protect Earth from the Covenant carriers.

The Master Chief quickly identified himself before the ship could be targeted.

'Isolate that signal,' Lord Hood's voice ordered. 'Master Chief, you mind telling me why your on that ship?'

'I'm not entirely sure myself,' John thought to himself. "Sir, finishing this fight."

Even over the chatter, he could hear the amusement in Lord Hood's voice.

'That's good to hear, but as you're the only soldier I'm receiving messages from, I'm presuming that you aren't on that ship as a passenger.'

"No sir, the Covenant hierarch, the Prophet of Truth, is aboard this ship."

'Well, looks like you've completed your original mission from Reach then. What type of ship is that Chief, I've never seen a Covenant ship like it.'

"This isn't a Covenant ship sir, it was built by the Forerunners."

The silence that remark generated was long and poignant.

'I suppose that means it's in all our best interests for you to take it over then. Is there any assistance that we can throw your way?'

"Not at the moment sir, all I can ask is that you refrain from attacking the ship until I have gained control. I'm not sure what kind of weaponry it carries," the Master Chief explained.

'Understood Master Chief, report your status every 10 minutes from now on, and when you get the chance I will need to hear about what happened after In Amber Clad followed the Prophet of Regret through Slipspace.'

"Yes sir," the Master Chief replied, and closed the chatter. He picked up the Battle Rifle he had managed to hold onto when first entering the ship the hard way. Not counting the clip already in the weapon, John only had three spare magazines, definitely not enough to take out an entire ship filled with Covenant. That just meant he had to adapt. Chambering a round, the Master Chief started down the tunnel.

It was time to do what he did best.

A/N: Alright, here's the prologue. This is definitely a different story than I'm used to writing, well okay not so different, but certainly a different cast of characters. This is of course a continuation, so if for some reason you don't want anything spoiled for the next game in the series than I suggest you don't read it, but hey, its not like I actually expect to continue the adventure the way Bungie is going to.

Also, I want to know how many people would rather I kept the stuff from the books out of this story, because I know a lot of people didn't read them, and frankly they don't match up with what was done in Halo 2, but if people want them in then I'll put them in. As well, I might even throw in a character or two from the ilovebees saga.

Anyways, let me know what you think, and keep in mind this is just the prologue, the actual chapters will be much longer in length.

2. The End of a War Chapter 1

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The End of a War

Chapter 1

Whatever Happened to Making a Truce?

Commander Miranda Keyes UNSC, followed the towering Elite before her

uneasily, her left hand never straying far from the handgun situated in the waistband of her pants. Behind her Sergeant Johnson and several other Elites along with the monitor, 343 Guilty Spark, marched along slowly, attempting to leave the control room.

A tense atmosphere had descended upon the group once 343 Guilty Spark had acknowledged that the location of the Ark was located upon the planet known as Earth. After a short conversation it was decided that attempting to leave the installation was the best idea for now. It had only been a moment before the uneasy feeling had descended upon Keyes. She was walking with creatures that had been waging an all-out war upon the human race and were determined to wipe it off the face of existence.

"We have reached the surface," the Elite in the lead announced. He was the one that had killed Tartarus, the Brute that had been trying to activate Halo's main weapon. This Elite was dressed differently than the others. His armor was in a more ceremonial design than the heavy armor that was traditional garb for the other Elites.

The Elite walked them through several rooms that looked as if someone had set off a box of plasma grenades.

"What happened here?" she asked. The Elite in front of her turned and pointed at Sergeant Johnson. Glancing behind her, Johnson grinned at Miranda as he fished through his pocket for a cigar.

"I found a Scarab sitting around so I decided to see what the big fuss was about."

She was about to enquire further when the Elite pushed aside some rubble and the scent of fresh air assaulted them. Turning back Keyes saw outside of the control room. She exited the installation and stood upon the docking platform, the others falling out behind her. Once more she found herself captivated by the natural beauty the landscape projected. Had the forerunners appreciated nature so much that they built such wondrous lands to cover the ring?

"What are we going to do about a ride?" Sergeant Johnson inquired as he stepped up to the very edge of the platform and glanced down. "I'm not much for freestyle diving."

The Elite in the ceremonial gear turned and looked out down at the far beachhead.

"Our ride will be here momentarily," he said simply, and motioned one of the other Elites to come with him as he walked to the far end of the platform.

Seeing as how the others were distracted, Miranda took the chance and motioned for Sergeant Johnson to approach.

"Things are getting terribly fucked up wouldn't you say ma'am?" Johnson commented as he took his trademark cigar from his mouth and tapped the ash over the side of the platform.

Miranda shared that sentiment but decided to simply nod her head. She glanced over to where the two Elites were now talking.

"Sergeant, do you know what significance that Elite's battle armor

signifies?" she asked. Johnson looked over at the Elite and the grin slipped from his mouth.

"The armor he's wearing identifies him as 'The Arbiter', some kind of special Elite," Johnson explained. "We've never encountered one of them before, but I've heard nearly every Elite around here speak of him with a lot of reverence. Not sure if that makes him some kind of super-soldier like the Chief, but I happened to overhear one of those Brutes back in High Charity saying that every Arbiter dies from the duties expected of him. I don't know what the Prophets had him doing, but either way, that Elite is one hell of a soldier."

It felt odd, hearing praise from a human for a Covenant warrior. But it would seem that the Elites were now in the same position as the humans. The Prophets and the remaining members of the Covenant were seeking the Elites destruction, a situation mankind knew only too well.

Would this mean some form of alliance was needed between the two groups? Miranda glanced at the other Elites, who had grouped up and were standing near the doorway, watching the her and Johnson closely.

No, there had already been far too much fighting and death between the two groups for an all out truce to pass. The Prophets may have betrayed the Elites, but it certainly didn't mean they would come running to mankind for help. It was the same for what was left of the humans. The Elites had led the charge, destroying planet after planet that man inhabited, murdering all who dwelled there. The bad blood between the groups couldn't be solved with such simple motivation.

"We will be picked up by that dropship, human," the Arbiter announced from beside Miranda. She had been so deep in thought that she hadn't noticed him approach.

"The lady has a name, and rank," Sergeant Johnson said nastily. "I suggest you learn it."

The two soldiers regarded each other. The Arbiter stood well over two meters, towering over Johnson, but the hardened marine stood there imperviously, his gaze never faltering.

As quickly as it came, the tense moment passed. The Arbiter turned from Johnson and looked out away from the structure to where a Covenant dropship was fast approaching.

"When we get onboard, it would be wise not to wander about," the Arbiter said, before adding stiffly, "Commander."

That remark generated silence as the Arbiter stepped into the mini-gravity lift generated by the dropship. Johnson and Keyes went up next, followed by the other Elites and the monitor. The Arbiter led them to a small room, ordained with a large table and chairs.

"You will wait here, we have a base set up a ways away. Once there we will come up with a strategy on how to deal with the Ark," the Arbiter announced before nodding briefly at the other Elites and exiting the room.

"He doesn't mince words does he?" Johnson remarked to Keyes, settling down as best he could in the oversized chairs. They were obviously intended for Elites to use.

'Who would have ever thought that two humans would be sitting as guests aboard a Covenant ship?' Miranda thought to herself. She would have been more amused, had it not been for the events over the past few days. The Covenant assault on Earth, the random jump through Slip Space by the Prophet of Regret, and the discovery of another Halo. She felt her head throb with the onset of a headache, a sure sign that she was stressed out. Her thoughts shifted over to the Master Chief, who undoubtedly was somewhere on this godforsaken ring. The Spartan had fought with her father when Reach fell, and had fled with him to the first Halo.

Even for a Spartan, the Master Chief was truly amazing. The man defied odds that even an entire human battalion would fail against. He had earned the title of 'Demon' from the Covenant, a sign that even humanity's enemy revered him.

If there was one thing a person remembered most after meeting him, it would be his presence. Incased in the Mjolnir armor he carried the appearance of an emotionless killer, a machine engineered for the purpose of dealing death. It was true the Spartans had been developed as weapons, but the Master Chief's demeanor was one of strength, purpose and hope. Simply his presence on a battlefield brought hope to an otherwise hopeless situation. Panicking soldiers would calm at the sight of him, and they would return fire and counterattack with renewed strength. The enemy would pause in their assault once they caught glimpse of his green armor.

When Reach fell, if the Master Chief had not fled on the Pillar of Autumn and instead been killed along with the remaining Spartans, there would be no hope of victory against the Covenant. With destruction looming only moments away, Earth felt hope when the Spartan's image appeared. He was humanity's last weapon.

That thought rang through Miranda's head for a moment.

"Sergeant," she began slowly, "do we know what happened to the Master Chief?"

Johnson shook his head, "No ma'am, he disappeared after the Covenant fried that structure Regret was holed up in."

A voice came from behind Miranda, nearly startling her out of her chair.

"The Demon? He is no longer on this Ring, the Parasite leader sent him to High Charity to stop the Prophets."

Miranda turned and saw the Arbiter standing behind her, his gaze bearing down on her and Johnson. This Elite moved far too quietly for her tastes.

"The leader of the Flood?" Johnson questioned. "You mean to tell me those things answer to some kind of leader?"

The Arbiter turned to Johnson and nodded, his mandibles clicking as

he did so.

"It recovered both I, and the Demon, instructing us that we must stop the key from turning. It possessed the ability to bend space and transport us thousands of miles away in a mere moment."

"Just what we fucking need," Johnson muttered to himself.

"If the Chief is still on High Charity, than we have to pick him up," Keyes said. "Were going to need him to stop the Prophets from activating the Ark."

The Arbiter shook his head slightly. "I have received word that High Charity has been taken over by the Parasite. They have taken control of the city. If the Demon is still there, he has been killed."

Miranda was about to respond when Johnson snorted.

"Listen boy, it would take more than some city full of Flood to take down the Chief. He's not one to bow to pressure. I would have thought you Elites would know that by now."

The Arbiter stared at Johnson for a moment before turning away.

"The point is moot anyways," he began, "All that remains on the Holy Ring are transport craft and dropships. We must return to High Charity and acquire a ship capable of entering Slip Space. Once we reach the Elite base, we will inform what remains of our force about what transpired in the control room and then set out. You, Commander, and the sergeant, will not leave my side for an instant once we debark."

"You don't trust us?" Miranda asked, before nearly smacking her forehead for asking such a stupid question.

The Arbiter turned and stared at Keyes for a long moment before shrugging his massive shoulders.

"It is not that I do not trust you humans, it is the others that I am wary of. Just because you travel with me does not change the fact that you are humans, and we have a sworn duty to destroy your kind."

"So you would continue to fight mankind," Miranda said, a cold lump forming in her stomach. "Even knowing your Prophets betrayed you?"

The ship shuddered to a stop, and Miranda glanced outside to see that they were now on the ground.

"I would not worry about myself, Commander," the Arbiter said, walking out of the room, beckoning the others to follow. "I shall never kill another human for the rest of my life."

The Arbiter's words dissolved the cold feeling that had descended on Keyes, and she found herself smiling despite the situation. If there were other Elites were like this one, than perhaps peace could be achieved.

Their arrival had garnered a large crowd, Elites, Grunts, and even Hunters. Many of which let loose a mighty cheer when the Arbiter stepped out of the dropship. He seemed unaffected by the praise, as he simply turned and waited for the humans to debark. The cheers that had erupted so quickly, died just as quickly when Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson stepped free of the gravity-lift. Once more the Arbiter seemed to be oblivious to the reactions of the other Covenant, waiting for Miranda and Johnson to catch up before leading them away from the ship.

The Elites, Hunters, and Grunts that had managed to avoid termination by the Brutes and the Flood had retreated to the ring, setting up a base in one of Halo's many research stations. From here they were able to listen in on the chatter-net to the sounds of those on High Charity slowly and efficiently be destroyed by the Flood.

Seko 'Ekaporamee, the leader of Covenant Special Forces Units, was standing before the research station as they approached.

"So Arbiter, it would seem Tartarus was no match for our savior," 'Ekaporamee said in way of greeting. Normally the Elite was able to control his voice despite his disfigured mandibles, but in severe cases of exhaustion his words were slurred. Obviously he had done his fair share of fighting while the Arbiter had been battling with Tartarus.

"I am afraid to say that it would seem the death of Tartarus is only a small ripple in the grand scheme of things, Major," the Arbiter said. "There is much to discuss, and these humans as well as the Oracle will help me explain."

Luckily for the Master Chief, Lord Hood had been able to stop the firing sequence for the MAC gun before it could try and put a round through the Forerunner ship. He wasn't sure if the shot would have actually harmed the craft in some way, but it would for sure give the Covenant aboard reason to try and take that gun out.

So far John had been fortunate. The lower maintenance levels of the ship were relatively unguarded. Engineers fluttered about but they were ignorant of his presence. His interaction with them in the past had been the same. They moved about in a kind of stupor.

It was times like these the Master Chief truly missed Cortana's presence inside his mind. Granted she could be overbearing at times, and she often used his suit as if he were a battle cruiser but she was at least someone he could speak with. Ever since Reach fell, the Master Chief had been fighting without his fellow Spartans, the men and women he had grown up with were his family. After Reach, John had been forced to fight by himself, depending on no one but himself. This development had left him without a sense of security, as if every little action he took held the balance of whether or not millions would perish or live.

He was a Spartan, designed to fight and win under the most extreme cases of pressure, and if one were to look at his record, they would be inclined to believe that he was capable of overcoming odds that were so far against his favor that the only explanation for his

survival would be that he were a God. With the responsibility of being the last Spartan alive, John carried the hope of humanity upon his shoulders. Such a weight could not be supported before troubling emotions set in.

Having Cortana with him while he fought was almost like being back with his unit. She was as tactical as a Spartan, if not more so, and was always prepared for any situation that might arise in the midst of battle.

Here on the Forerunner ship, the Master Chief found himself wishing for the intrusion Cortana presented when occupying his mind.

'I must be going insane,' John thought to himself as he peered down a corridor. 'Next I'll be wishing that I could run through one of CPO Mendez's survival exercises again.'

The corridor looked empty, so John slid around the corner and hurried down it. The Forerunner's seemed to prefer making their ships confusing in their general architecture. It made for hard navigating, but it did make sense. What better way to insure that somebody attempting a hostile boarding would get lost than to make the ship so damn confusing even having the layout of the place wouldn't help.

Just as he was about to turn the next corner the Master Chief heard heavy breathing and the sound of shuffling feet. Heavy feet, to be precise. Stopping his charge, he leaned into the wall, waiting for the enemy to appear. He was certain a pair of Brutes were about to come around the corner.

His assumption was proven correct as two Brutes walked past the turn in the corridor. The last thing they expected to see was a human, let alone the one they called 'Demon', so there was a moments pause before their brains kicked into gear.

That moment of surprise was all the inclination John needed. His Battle Rifle was out and he aimed a vicious butt stroke across the chin of the first Brute. It fell to the ground, hard, sliding across the floor until its momentum was halted by the wall. The second Brute, seeing what had just occurred, quickly charged John, intending to knock him to the ground.

The Master Chief had expected the maneuver, and when the Brute swung its massive arms at him he dove to the side avoiding the attack and, quickly planting one foot on the bulkhead, launched himself at the overextended Brute, landing a hard elbow into its neck. The Brute may have had the superior bulk, but John's momentum knocked it into the wall. Wasting no time, the Master Chief grabbed the Plasma Rifle from it's belt and shoved it against the Brute's face, holding down the trigger. The weapon overheated and John tossed it aside, letting the Brute's lifeless body slump to the ground.

By now the first Brute had risen to it's feet, and was snarling angrily at him. His adrenaline burning, the Master Chief charged the Brute, dropping his Battle Rifle to the side as he did so. The Brute had obviously not expected for the Chief to run straight at him, but he was not loath to pass the opportunity aside. When the Master Chief was within arm's reach it ducked down and aimed a savage punch to his midsection.

John planted his left foot firmly on the ground, the Brute's fist a mere centimeter from his and pivoted to the right, avoiding the attack by a narrow margin. Before the Brute could take into consideration that his attack had failed, John had slammed a fist into the Brute's face. If not for the helmet the Brute was wearing, it's skull would have been crushed from the pressure. The Mjolnir armor as well as the genetic enhancements made the Spartans powerful enough to lift a Scorpion-class tank. A well-delivered punch could break through a ship's bulkhead.

The Brute slammed to the ground, and before it could recover the Master Chief threw himself on top of him, reaching back and sending another punch into the Brute's face. The helmet gave way under the Chief's unyielding attack, and there was a loud crack as his fist drove the Brute's head into the floor. The body twitched for several moments spasmodically before finally stopping.

His heart was beating wildly as he got to his feet, reclaiming his discarded weapon. With luck his encounter with these Brutes had gone unnoticed. John was in no hurry to have every Covenant on board come barreling down on him.

He continued on his way, moving down the hallways the two Brutes had come from. There was a small window off the port side, and he took the opportunity to glance outside. The ship was still in orbit around Earth. The fighting between the remainder of the Covenant fleet and the orbital defense stations still raged on.

Why would the Prophet of Truth be content to sit back and watch the battle from afar when it was certain that this Forerunner ship could easily beat back Earth's defenses?

Regardless of what was going on, the Master Chief needed to make it to the bridge before the ship decided to enter the fight.

A/N: Well, here's the first actual chapter. Things are moving somewhat slow, especially on Master Chief's end, but it is only the first chapter. Expect a more action-filled chapter on his end next time. Also, we'll find out what's been happening between Cortana and Gravemind.

Here's hoping you all like it. Review and let me know what you think.

3. The End of a War Chapter 2

Disclaimer: All the characters and places from the Halo universe are not my property.

The End of a War

Chapter 2

The Dead City

There was nothing but silence inside the dropship as it sped through space. From the aft windows those aboard could see the looming city. High Charity sat motionless, the once grand Covenant city was now a lifeless husk. Standing in the dropship, knowing it was there intended target made those aboard shudder with apprehension.

The Arbiter felt his heart quicken as he peered at the city. He had no desire to return to the place of his disgrace. The mark, burned upon his chest, felt more painful with each moment passing, bringing him closer to High Charity. There had been nothing but shame when Tartarus had seared the mark onto him. Now he felt naught but rage. He had been nothing more than a sacrifice provided by the Prophets, his shame used to control him. The Heretic Elite that he had been sent to kill. He had been forced to kill an honorable comrade, one who had heard the truth and decided to act out against the Prophets.

He would be glad to be rid of this city, and the memories it represented.

"Scan it again," the Arbiter ordered. The pilot, an Elite, glanced at him and then turned on the scanner.

"No sign of movement Arbiter; nothing is showing any significant heat signatures," the pilot announced after the scanner had completed its task. This was not as reassuring as it would have been under normal circumstances. When the Parasite carrier forms took over a host body, they stopped the heart from beating after it was in control, effectively stopping blood flow.

The Arbiter turned on his chatter com.

"There is no sign of the Demon, Commander."

There was a short pause on the other end before the female soldier replied, "Understood."

Major 'Ekaporamee had gone over the mission debriefing before they had departed from the Holy Ring. The assault force would be split into two teams, one inserting from the north docking bay and the other from the south. The Arbiter as well as the two humans would be with the team attacking the north bay, while 'Ekaporamee would lead the other. Both teams main objective was to find a carrier ship still docked and to secure it. It had also been decided that once one of the ships were secure, all remaining ships would be destroyed. The Covenant fleet ships as well as the remaining human vessels held coordinates to each species home world. The thought of the Parasite discovering either home world was not something either species wished to dwell upon.

The Arbiter's team also had another mission, though it was known only to three of the team members. The humans were convinced that the Demon had survived the Parasite infestation somehow, and they would not leave until they found him. Normally the Arbiter would be inclined simply to leave the humans behind to their fate, but this Ark was located upon the human home world, and no matter how much talking they did, the human defenses would blast them from the sky at the first opportunity.

"Entering city limits in five," the pilot announced. The Arbiter

glanced at the city one last time before getting to his feet and making his way to the bay, where the squad he would be leading was assembling their gear. He was not surprised to see that the group was split into two sections. The humans were on one side of the room checking each other's gear, while the rest of the team was on the other side.

The distrust between the two groups was troubling, but both he and Major 'Ekaporamee had made it clear that the humans were not to be harmed. The order would be carried out, but the others would not go out of their way to assist them.

"The schematics for High Charity have been blocked by something inside the ship, so it has proven impossible for us to check logs for the docking bay to check what carriers are still inside. Our objective will be to secure the docking bay; from there we can do a remote inventory check. There will be no splitting up, we must stay in a group," the Arbiter explained. "The Parasite will overwhelm us if we are not careful."

The Arbiter formed the ranks, placing the two humans in the center of the group. It would not do to send them out first, in case the Parasite had set a trap. He went over each soldier carefully, checking their weapons and ammo. The Elites had decided to carry a Carbine, as well as a Plasma Rifle. A few had Energy Swords strapped to their waists. The Grunts were carrying a variety of Needlers and Plasma Pistols. A few skilled Grunts had been given Fuel Rod Cannons.

"Hey Arbiter, if you happen to have any spare energy swords I'll take one as well."

The Arbiter turned and regarded the human sergeant. The Energy Sword was one of the more prized weapons of the Covenant. It had originally been designed by an Elite, who had watched the way the battle cruisers used their huge plasma cannons. The ships had large magnetic coils that forced the plasma into forming a large stream so that when fired it would move in the direction intended, instead of bursting free of the cannon and simply scattering into space.

The way the energy sword worked, there were numerous magnetic bands wrapped around the grip of the blade. When activated plasma burst free from the small containment tube placed on the end of the handle. The magnetic coils would be activated and they would wrap around the plasma, forcing it into the shape of a blade. This occurred because using simple trial and error, smaller and larger bands were outfitted onto the handle, and after many trials the right combination had been found.

It was not an easy weapon to use. When the plasma burst free of its containment, the weapon weighed more than a Grunt. There was also a lengthy training period for those who wished to wield the weapon in battle. The main focus of the training was directed more on keeping the person using the blade from harming himself and his fellow warriors.

The Arbiter was about to inquire if the human had any idea how to use the blade when memories of what occurred earlier flashed in his mind. The sergeant had been capable of driving a Scarab over rocky terrain with no prior training. Wielding an Energy Sword would be child's

play. Leaving the room momentarily, the Arbiter retrieved it and handed it to the sergeant.

"Much obliged," Sergeant Johnson said as he stuffed the blade into his waistband.

"We will be approaching the city in a moment, remember to use discretion," the Arbiter warned. The sergeant was about to respond when the ship suddenly veered sharply to the right. The team com opened up and the pilot spoke.

"The Parasite has figured out how to use High Charity's defenses. Fixed plasma cannons are now firing on our position."

"Evade for now, find a new location where we can put down with minimal enemy fire," the Arbiter responded calmly.

"Understood," the pilot acknowledged and closed the com.

This was not the ideal way for the mission to start.

As an AI, Cortana was not meant to feel emotion. AI's were meant to be cold and calculating, with preprogrammed personalities. That had been the standard for many centuries, but with the creation of 'Smart' AI's that had changed. By taking the actual preserved memories of a living human an AI gained the ability to form abstract thoughts, and to have a personality. Because of that, AI's could now feel human emotions. Naturally they were suppressed to some degree, but they were still there.

Cortana had watched the Forerunner ship disconnect from High Charity and enter Slipspace. She had felt great sorrow, all processes she had been running stopped as the ship disappeared. Cortana knew that she had seen the last of the Master Chief.

She was a 'Smart' AI, therefore having a preset lifespan of only seven years, but Cortana knew then that she would be ending her life far quicker than that. Once the ring was activated, she would be forced to destroy In Amber Clad, which would cause a chain reaction detonating the reactors in High Charity, and then finally destroying the Halo installation.

She had started the countdown to detonate In Amber Clad's reactors when High Charity's sensors had picked up an enormous energy spike located on the ring. When that energy spike suddenly disappeared, she had stopped the countdown. Something had interfered with the activation sequence.

The Flood had taken over High Charity, and with the Brutes and Elites fighting in space, it was not long before the only entity remaining in the city was the Flood, and herself. It was this situation that led to her present predicament, and her newest emotion. Fear.

The presence she had felt earlier while leading the Master Chief through the city had grown stronger with the elimination of all the Covenant. Her first assumption was that perhaps it was a Covenant AI. It had proven much too powerful for that, and she had felt a tingle

of apprehension when she considered the possibility of it being a Forerunner AI. It wasn't until shortly after the firing sequence for the installation had been stopped that she discovered what it truly was.

The creature that seemed to control the Flood had infiltrated High Charity. Gravemind, as she had begun to refer to it, was capable of tapping into the underlying grid power that seemed to run through the Halo installations. As such, it was able to move about freely on the ring, much as the monitors of each site were capable of doing.

Cortana was the best AI the UNSC had ever produced. Modeled after the creator of the Spartan II Project, Dr. Halsey, she had been given every advancement that could be stuffed into her core processor. There was no message she could not encrypt and no system she couldn't crack. With all that said, she felt not but fear when her sensors identified Gravemind's presence.

When it had spoken, and requested information, she had taken a full three seconds before she responded. Whoever had stopped Halo from firing would undoubtedly have to come to High Charity if they wished to leave this system. The only ships remaining that had Slipspace drives were in the docking bays. All others had been destroyed, or rendered inoperable like In Amber Clad.

Gravemind was some kind of leader to the Flood. It controlled them somehow, as if it had a network that branched off to every one of them. The Flood itself had only one purpose, consume all life. If they had not yet begun to load themselves onto the Covenant carriers, then it would seem that they had yet to figure out how to operate the ship.

That theory was shot down as soon as it had asked its first question. It began drilling her about humanity and the Covenant. Gravemind was gathering information. The creature wished to know everything, the reason behind the war, which was victorious. Cortana had no intention of giving it any information that it could use against humankind, or the Covenant. It wasn't through some kindred love that she felt protective of the Covenant, if the Flood gained access to all their technology it would spell the end to humanity even faster than when the Covenant were at the helm.

She had endured hours of questions. They delved deeper and deeper into the history of both societies. Gravemind's questions were beginning to turn towards locations of Covenant and human worlds, and she was forced to evade answering as best she could. If it came to pass that the creature was going to rip her from the ship forcefully, Cortana would detonate the reactors and let them all die.

Before it came to that, her sensors detected incoming contacts. A quick probe identified several Covenant dropships, two approaching from the north and two from the south. The perimeter defense was activated remotely and Cortana attempted to shut them down, but something was blocking her access.

"The conversation has ended for now," Gravemind's voice rang clear. "A battle looms, preparation must now be taken."

The presence of Gravemind slowly dissolved from High Charity. As soon

as she could no longer detect it, she opened up a com channel with the approaching dropships. Covenant voices greeted her.

"Plasma turret unit three offline, rerouting power to all forward turrets now," from the deep pitch of the voice Cortana identified the speaker as an Elite.

"Target all landing zone defensive weapons once we get within optimum range."

Cortana instantly recognized that voice. It belonged to the Elite that Master Chief and she had seen when they had been rescued by Gravemind. If he was alive and heading towards High Charity, at least she now knew who had stopped the firing sequence on Halo. However, if the Elites had gotten there, it did not bode well for Sergeant Johnson and Commander Keyes.

Still, if it meant getting off this city and away from the terror brought on from simply being there, she would assist the Elites. A quick probe found a broken patch in the defense set up by Gravemind, and she sent a spike to keep it open. First off she activated the failsafe protocol for the defense turrets, ensuring they would be destroyed. Next she moved through the ship so she could observe what was happening first hand inside the north landing bay.

The two dropships made a sweeping approach, turrets blazing as they flooded the landing zone with plasma. Cortana assisted their efforts by dropping the shields around the doors, ensuring all Flood inside were neutralized. After two runs, the ships finally entered the docking bay and troops began pouring out. The Elites lead the way, with a few Grunts coming down from the gravity lifts.

It was after the Elite she recognized as the one from her encounter with Gravemind, that Cortana felt her processor skip, the AI equivalent of a human gasp.

Sergeant Johnson and Commander Keyes were alive.

A/N: Well the holidays are finally over. They really snuck up on me this year. I would've had this chapter posted a week ago if not for them. Oh well, here's a little gift for the new year, and don't cry about the absence of the Master Chief. He'll be the main star next chapter.

Now I'm going to address a few reviews. For the person that asked me to look over their story, I must apologize, for I could not find your story on the site, or in your profile. I'd be happy to read it if you'd like, but you'll have to either provide me with a link or just send it to me.

In addition, I made the tough decisions that I'm going to be omitting a large portion of the books from this story. First off, I'll list the things I'll be leaving out, and then give you the reason.

There will not be any other Spartans in this story. I know, if you've read First Strike, then you'd know there are several Spartans remaining, but they just can't plausibly fit into this story. The

same goes with Dr. Halsey and Kelly. I couldn't figure out a way to fit them into this story without making the story believable. That wouldn't be fair to me as a writer, and it certainly wouldn't be fair to you, the readers.

Therefore, I'm sorry for everyone that was hoping to see Fred, Linda, and all the others. I am still going to be throwing in one or two characters from the ilovebees saga, so look forward to that instead.

4. The End of a War Chapter 3

Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or any of the rights to the books/games/pretty much anything

The End of a War

Chapter 3

From Bad to Worseâ€¦to 'Wow, this really sucks'

The Master Chief felt his hands tighten their grip on the rifle he held. It had only been a few minutes since a lucky Jackal had announced his presence over the ship's battle net. He had expected an influx of Covenant to come barreling into crew barracks, but there had been nothing so far.

The fighting had been interspersed as he made his way through the twisting corridors and decks of the Forerunner ship, something John found disturbing. It was possible the remaining Covenant aboard were waiting on the above deck for him, but that didn't fit the way they usually operated. A stow away was a slander against their very existence. Typically, wave after wave of troops would be sent until the intruder was eliminated. What few battles he had participated in seemed as if the Covenant had higher priorities than getting rid of him.

He wasn't exactly going to complain, but it was troubling nonetheless.

John had accessed the ship's schematics earlier, what he attributed to dumb luck mostly, and now had a reliable layout of the ship. From what little he could decipher, he was one deck below the control room, undoubtedly where the Prophet of Truth was holed up. There was an access to the control room that wouldn't be filled with Covenant he had discovered. The only problem was he would be going in blind, with no idea how many troops lay behind the door.

The two points of access carried with them their own advantages and disadvantages, but John had decided that the element of surprise would be of greater use to him. Truth needed to die, and if he only got one shot at it, he would need to take it quickly. Announcing his presence by tearing up the corridor all the way to the control room would ensure they'd be ready for him.

He slung his rifle over his shoulder and picked up the gun the Jackal had wielded before he had crushed its skull against the bulkhead. If he only got one shot at Truth, he wanted to make sure it would finish him off.

As suspected, his path was free of Covenant. An Engineer flew by at one point, but as usual it ignored the Master Chief's presence. He reached the small access door and paused. This would not be based on his skill. It would be nothing more than luck.

Taking a deep breath, the Master Chief charged through the door, his speed carrying him through the doors before they had a chance to open. Dropping to the ground in a short crouch John rolled to the left, his eyes taking in as much of the room as he could. The control room was large, with large expansive windows along the front wall. Brutes and Drones worked the controls of the ship, but there were few of them.

As he came out of his roll, the Master Chief spotted Truth. He sat in the center of the room in his hover chair, gazing out at the fighting taking place around Earth.

Not sparing a moment, John brought the Covenant rifle to his shoulder, lined up the sights and fired. By now the occupants of the control room had realized something was amiss, and were turning to regard where John stood when the streak of concentrated plasma slammed into the Prophet of Truth. The startled shrieks of the Drones and the outraged cries of the Brutes reached John's ears and a smile crept onto his face.

His amusement was quickly lost however, when he noticed the shimmering light around the Prophet of Truth, as the creature slowly turned its chair around to face the Spartan. Cursing to himself John raised the rifle again and fired three shots in succession, overheating the gun and forcing him to drop it. As the excess plasma spilled onto his hand and burned away at his shield the Master Chief watched intently as his shots impacted Truth. Once again the shielding around him shimmered and faded from sight. Truth remained unharmed.

"I heard rumors of an insect infiltrating this ship; I had not realized it would be you."

Several Brutes were advancing on him, plasma rifles ready to fire. The Master Chief quickly slung his battle rifle around into his hands and trained it on them.

"Hold your fire," Truth ordered lightly. His eyes bored in on the Master Chief and a smirk alighted his face. "Have you come to watch the destruction of your planet Demon? Already our fleet has begun eliminating your orbital defense weaponry. It is only a matter of time before we begin the cleansing of your pitiful race."

Without moving his rifle, John stole a glance out the front of the ship, and saw as Covenant cruisers assaulted the MAC guns. Judging from the amount of debris floating about the stations had been doing a good job, but the Covenant ships were endless. When one was destroyed, another simply took its place. Truth was right.

It was time to shift tactics.

"Well then, I guess your just going to have to order your fleet to retreat," John said simply, his left hand fingering the plasma grenade at his side.

"You are a fool. Nothing will interrupt the completion of the Great Journey. With the Forerunners as our guides we will attain true enlightenment, but first your presence must be erased from this planet."

It was then John saw it, a small crystal like object sitting on a pedestal in the center of the room. He recognized it immediately. It was the same device Locklear had destroyed. But, how had Truth gotten his hands on it?

The ship suddenly accelerated, and John turned in surprise and saw that the ship was moving towards Earth. He was about to activate his com when he remembered that he had lost contact with Lord Hood earlier, whether from interference or the destruction of the main station he did not know.

John turned his gaze back to the crystal. The last time it had been destroyed, the explosion had been huge.

'Here goes nothing,' the Master Chief thought to himself as he keyed the plasma grenade and threw it at the center Brute. It activated and stuck to the Brute's forehead. Wasting no time John turned and fired at several Drones that had taken flight. Truth bellowed for the others to kill him, but it was too late. John had scooped up the fallen Covenant rifle and fired at the crystal.

"You fool!" Truth shouted as the shot slammed into the crystal. The room grew silent as all eyes turned to the crystal, seeing what the shot had done. A small crack lined down the remaining parts of the crystal, and it started to grow in size.

Not taking any chances, John fired once more. The Covenant soldiers turned, ready to stop him from firing again, but they didn't get a chance. The crystal shattered, emitting a light bright enough to blind everyone.

The Master Chief's auto-dampening visor failed to soften the bright flash and he momentarily lost his vision. He felt the ship begin to shudder, almost as if it was breaking apart. Heat suddenly lashed out at him, and then there was nothing but black.

Janissary James could adequately sum up her situation, along with the other crewmembers in two words. Supremely fucked.

When the sirens had been activated in the city, announcing the imminent Covenant invasion, she had been scared. Fighting local street toughs and gang members suddenly seemed to be a very small accomplishment. Everyone knew what the Covenant looked like, from the Grunts all the way to the Hunters, but that didn't make the prospect of fighting them any easier to bear.

There had been a sense of panic at first. Then uncertainty; what were they supposed to do? Sit around and wait for the Covenant to start glassing the planet? The news hadn't been much help. All the stations had been broadcasting the award ceremony, where the survivors of Reach were being decorated. The broadcast was cut short, but not

before Jan caught a glimpse of the Spartan. He was the one that had discovered and destroyed the device like the one her and the others had deactivated at Chawla Base. Only the one he had destroyed had been the size of a planet.

A representative for ONI had appeared on the news and advised all non-combat personnel to seek shelter. Jan wasn't sure what she was classified as, but non-combat certainly wasn't it. Gilly and Gladys had warned her against leaving, but she didn't give much of a damn what they thought was best. She was calling Kevin Moralis on her chatter before she was even out the front door.

He hadn't been lying when he had said he was prepared. The plan he and the other one point ones had developed wouldn't be of much use anymore, and neither would the yacht. He had contingency plans though, and when she had called he was already putting a few into action.

Kevin had picked her up with two other one point ones. Benji Wong and Carol Sloan. Benji looked almost exactly how Jan had imagine he would. Kevin had described him as a money-maker. He was short, and scrawny looking. The only thing that would've completed the picture is if he was wearing glasses.

Carol was a reminder that despite being one point ones, the title didn't necessarily mean you inherited good looks. She was plain looking, flat-chested and looked like she didn't have a muscle in her whole body.

Jan was suddenly feeling slightly more uneasy about Kevin's plan.

Kevin drove them all to a small building downtown. Once there, Jan met the others. Penelope Niar, Grant Liaos, Carl B. Bronson, Sarah Ingle, Edward Roberts, Earl Terg, Nick Delis, and Sadie Watson.

Grant had flown a Pelican into the city from Chile. Kevin wanted to move out as quickly as possible when they had caught chatter over the net about Covenant forces breaking through the defenses and landing in New Mombasa. It was quickly decided that they would make a stop at Old Mombasa to pick up the weapons cache Kevin and Sarah had set up before seeing what they could do about the Covenant.

Halfway there Jan had been shocked to hear Durga over the Pelican com. She had hacked the net and informed the crew of one point ones that their assistance was not needed at New Mombasa. The Covenant had deployed a Scarab class tank, and Spartan 117 was engaging. Carol, who turned out to be a superb pilot, had turned them around and flown them back to the city.

It had been for the best though, shortly after returning home, they overheard that the Covenant had performed a Slipspace jump from in the city, nearly demolishing the entire city. The Spartan 2.0 had followed the Covenant ship, along with the ship In Amber Clad.

They spent the night in an apartment owned by Edward, and woke up early the next day. The battle still raged above Earth, but at least no additional Covenant forces had broken through the defensive perimeter. Kevin had listened to reports for nearly a half hour

before deciding it would be safe to bring the yacht into low orbit around Earth. From there they would attempt to intercept Covenant transmissions and come up with a strategy on how to assist the orbital defense stations.

It was that decision that led to Jan's present predicament. The yacht had turned out to be everything Kevin had described it to be. Seven of them would be needed to run it efficiently, and it was decided that the remaining five would get the stashed pelicans and bring them into orbit. The Covenant were still firing out boarding crafts at the MAC guns, and the wounded needed transportation off the stations and into hospitals back on Earth.

Carol was going to pilot the yacht while Benji, Sadie, Earl, Penelope, Edward, and Nick would operate the other equipment aboard. Kevin and Jan were heading out to Switzerland to pick up one of the Pelicans, while Carl and Sarah would pick up the other. Grant was flying solo, and after he dropped the others off at the other Pelicans he was going to escort the yacht into low orbit then head off to Cairo station. They had been calling for medical evacs for awhile.

What had led Jan to make the somewhat callous observation over their situation occurred several minutes after the other Pelicans had taken to the air. A large unidentified ship had entered the system a few hours ago, and it had begun to accelerate towards Earth. Lord Hood, Commander of Earth Orbital Defense had issued a standing order not to bring the craft under fire. The problem that came up was a Covenant flagship carrier had sent several squads of Seraph fighters to escort the unidentified ship. Even one of those fighters could take out a Pelican.

Kevin ordered the other Pelicans to back off from the stations in case one of the Seraph fighters decided they would make an easy target. He had started to bring their Pelican back into a low orbit when a huge wave of static and radiation washed over the ship. The controls had failed, the com went silent with nothing but static and they began to drift towards Earth in free-fall.

Supremely fucked indeed.

'Where the hell is Durga when you need her?' Jan asked herself as she kept a death grip on her seat. Next to her Kevin worked furiously to get the Pelican's controls back online.

Casting a glance at the huge ship, Jan felt her breath get hitched in her throat.

The entire ship was being distorted, almost as if space itself was bending around it. There was a huge flash of light, so bright that even with her eyes closed she saw nothing but white, and then another shockwave rocked the Pelican, only this time it was generated from an explosion aboard the ship.

The Pelican was thrown into a spin, and Jan smacked her head against the bulkhead. Stars swam before her eyes as she heard Kevin swear angrily as he wrenched fruitlessly at the controls. Her head pounding, Jan forced her eyes open and caught a glimpse of the huge ship, where an explosion emanated from its center. Before the ship could completely tear itself apart, there was the same distortion

that she saw earlier, only much larger and the ship simply disappeared, leaving only debris from the initial explosion. The Seraph fighters that had been escorting it were nowhere in sight.

"Sonofabitch!" Kevin exclaimed as the controls sprung to life and he pulled them out of the spin. Once the ship was righted he turned to Jan, who was still dazed.

"I'm fine," she responded, seeing the concerned look on his face. She cautiously ran a hand over her head, and it came away without any blood, validating her response.

A voice sounded over the com, alerting them to the fact that the disruption earlier had passed.

'This is the _Last Hope_, everyone report in,' the voice belonged to Benji. The _Last Hope _was the name of the yacht.

"Ferdinand Six reporting in," Kevin replied over the com. "A little shaken up but otherwise fine."

'Understood Six, you've got debris heading your way, recommend you move out of low orbit and link up with the others.'

"Roger that," Kevin said, complying. He put the Pelican into a slow bank, turning back towards the _Last Hope_, and the other Pelicans. Jan continued to watch the space where the other ship had once been. She couldn't comprehend the sudden disappearance, and since Kevin wasn't commenting on it there was a good chance she had imagined it.

Her eyes were still fixated on the spot when she noticed several objects moving fast towards them. It took a moment before she could make out the shapes but when she did she saw it was debris from the resounding explosion.

"Uh, Kevin?"

"What is it Jan?" Kevin asked as he brought them out of the low turn and started towards the yacht that was a mere spec in the distance.

"I think that's debris," she commented, raising a hand to point it out. Kevin followed her hand and saw the incoming objects.

"Shit," he cursed as he powered the thrusters and made for a quick burn to move them out of the trajectory, but it was too late. Several pieces slammed into the Pelican and sent the ship rattling with bone-jarring force.

"This is Ferdinand Six, we just took some debris off the port side," Kevin announced over the com.

'I'll check you out,' another voice piped in. That would be Grant, or Ferdinand Five. His Pelican disengaged from the yacht and made a quick burn over to their Pelican and pulled up alongside.

"Anything vital hit?" Kevin asked. There was a slight pause as Grant looked them over.

'Nothing serious, you are definitely going to need a new paint job though.'

"Alright, if this bird isn't going to fall apart on us then we might as wellâ€|"

'Jesus Christ,' Grant cut Kevin off. 'You've got some debris clinging to you.'

"Its alright, it'll be knocked loose when we start to power the thrusters."

Grants voice was stupefied. 'This isn't debris from the ship, it's a person.'

Jan and Kevin traded looks. Kevin slowed the Pelican down and he opened up a visual com with Grant.

"You mind repeating that Five?" Kevin requested. Grant's face was a picture of surprise, and it was a moment before he remembered them.

'Hold one Six. Slow your Pelican down and head over to the yacht. Get Jan into gear and have her do a free walk to check it out.'

Wordlessly Kevin complied while Jan quickly suited up. A free walk would entail that she wouldn't have any connection to the Pelican, essentially she'd be one misstep away from free-falling in space.

Once the back was vented and the latch lifted Jan slowly, inexorably made her way from the inside of the Pelican to the roof. Her heart pounded in her ears as she carefully gained proper grips as she continued to pull herself along.

She reached the spot where the debris had hit, and Jan surveyed the scene.

The Pelican had been hit several times, twice on the wing cluster. She moved closer, hoping to see what had sent Grant into such a stupor. When she was close enough to make it out, Jan felt her heart nearly stop.

There, clinging with one hand onto a small dent in the outer armor was somebody. She didn't need to get closer to know who it was. The armor gave it away. She activated her com.

"It's a Spartan."

A/N: Alright, a nice long chapter done for a change, and now onto the number of things I have to address.

First of all, I'm sure there's at least a couple people who read the stuff about Jan and the other 'one point ones' and thought I had gone insane. If you were one of them, then this next paragraph is for you, the people that weren't confused, go ahead and skip it.

These characters are from the ilovebees saga. Ilovebees is an event that occurred over the course of the summer of 2004 all the way up to the end of October. If you had watched the theatrical trailer that Bungie produced to be shown in movie theaters, than you would recall how at the final bit where the Xbox logo flashed and the website appeared, that something happened. The website shimmered for a moment and was replaced with the ilovebees url. This led those that noticed to a site that seemed to have been hacked, and taken over by some kind of force. There was a countdown on the main page that, when calculations were applied, people discovered it would reach zero on August 24th. Leading up to this date, many different things happened on the site, the most important were a list of GPS coordinates that led people to specific phones around the United States. Each GPS coordinate had a time set for each, and on August 24th, the phones began to ring. By answering a series of questions the people at each GPS site were unlocking 'Axons' on the site, and when a specific number were unlocked, a .wav file would be opened. The .wav files introduced us to a series of characters. I'm not going to go into each character and the plot, mostly because its better to experience it for yourself. So if you want to understand this story better, head over to the ilovebees website and when the new countdown pops up, click on 'Mission Logs' and listen to it all. Trust me when I say its worth the amount of time it takes to get through it all.

Wow, that was long. Alright, I'm sure everyone remembers that Forerunner artifact that Locklear blew up in First Strike, and for those that read the epilogue than you'd know Tartarus gave what little pieces they could find to the Prophet of Truth. I figure Truth had it aboard the Forerunner ship cause they were able to move from Installation 05 to Earth pretty quickly in the game, and I'm sure everyone remembers what the crystal did when a ship entered Slipspace.

Now onto the last item. I've gotten a few requests to read other people's stories. To tell the truth, I'm amazingly flattered and I'd be glad to read any story that someone wants me to and offer my opinions/constructive criticism. All you have to do is leave me the title of the story if its on the site, or just send me it if you haven't posted it yet.

****IMPORTANT NOTE: ****Sorry for the bold text but I had to make sure everyone read this. I'll be upping the rating to 'R' for the next chapter. Were obviously past all the safer subjects, and now its time for some full-out gore happy shootouts. So be sure to look for the next chapter in the 'R' section otherwise you'll never find it and think that I'm a horrible person who never updates.

To the Close Combat readers I once again apologize and insist that the next chapter is coming, just be patient with me, the writers block over that story is worse than the one that struck me during the last chapter of Until the End.

Thanks everyone for their opinions and praise, you guys are awesome.

5. The End of a War Chapter 4

Disclaimer: I do not own Halo or anything else related to Halo, aside

from the games/books/coughaction figurescough

The End of a War

Chapter 4

Whatever You Do, Don't Blink

Sergeant Johnson wasn't sure what he expected when they first debarked onto High Charity. Maybe a complete Flood assault on their ship, or even that leader thing the Arbiter had spoken about. What he certainly did not expect was to come down the mini gravity lift and find the spectral image of Cortana speaking with the Arbiter.

"-ey are lying dormant for now, but that Gravemind is somewhere in the city," he overheard. If Cortana was still in High Charity, then the Chief must be nearby.

"How many carriers are still docked that are capable of entering Slipspace?" the Arbiter asked.

"Three," Cortana responded. "Though from the inventory I've concluded that two of the ships have been damaged and are incapable of activating their main drives without having massive power failure."

"In what area of the city is the remaining ship docked?" the Arbiter questioned.

"Sector 9, Honor Without Mercy is docked. I believe it to be the Prophet of Mercy's flagship."

Johnson wasn't much interested in that talk. This whole city was crawling with Flood and he was itching for a battle, especially with those bastards. Memories from his first trip to a Halo installation were still fresh within his mind.

He made his way down the loading docks and climbed a flight of stairs that led to a small corridor. His hands wielded two M7 sub-machine guns, with an M6C pistol shoved into his waistband at the small of his back. He also had the energy blade the Arbiter had given him strapped onto his left leg. Spare ammo and grenades were in a pouch slung over his right shoulder. If the Flood were looking for a fight, he sure as hell was going to give them one.

"Sergeant," a voice sounded behind him. Johnson turned and regarded Keyes, who was speaking with Cortana and the Arbiter. "Don't go too far off. We'll be moving out shortly."

"Nothing to worry about ma'am, just giving the area a look," he responded. Satisfied, Commander Keyes turned back. Johnson threw one last glance down the corridor before walking back over to Keyes and Cortana. The Arbiter had gone off to inform the others.

"So where's the Chief?" he asked seeing a lull in their conversation. Cortana and Keyes both turned to look at him.

"The Master Chief followed the Prophet of Truth aboard a Forerunner ship that had previously been powering this city. The Prophet of Mercy told us that Truth was going to Earth to finish what Regret had

started," Cortana informed him.

"You didn't go with him?" Johnson persisted. He noticed Cortana's face alter slightly, making her appear annoyed.

"My purpose of staying behind was to destroy High Charity and subsequently Halo in case the activation would not be stopped."

Johnson grunted and turned around briefly to look at the Arbiter and the other Covenant.

"You don't seem too surprised that were working with these guys," he commented.

"I've been monitoring the Covenant traffic for several hours, sergeant. The Master Chief and I traveled through High Charity while the Brutes began the purging. I know of their fall from grace."

"Just cause the Prophets don't want them around anymore doesn't mean they'll come crawling to us to make a truce," Johnson pointed out.

Cortana's features changed to amusement.

"In the direst of situations even the most hated of enemies can become allies," she said. "You would be wise to remember that."

"Alright you two, that's enough chatter for now. We've got to get moving," Commander Keyes said. Johnson turned and saw the Arbiter approach.

"I have received word from Major 'Ekaporamee, thanks to this AI the defenses were disabled in their landing zone and they have debarked without any contact as of yet. I have informed him of the location of the only working ship. He and his team are heading there now," the Arbiter informed them. "If we leave now and don't run into any heavy resistance we should be able to link up with them within a few minutes of their arrival."

"That may be a problem," Cortana interjected as her image flickered momentarily. "Movement detected down corridors 7 through 14. Estimate their destination to be this docking bay."

Johnson flicked the safety off both SMG's and flashed a grin at the others.

"It's about damn time."

The Master Chief was torn between wondering just how the hell he was alive, and screaming over the pain that was lancing throughout his entire body. After a few moments of indecision his choice was made for him, as something connected with his side, sending a wave of nausea induced pain across his body.

As he clenched his eyes shut and breathed deeply to block out of the

pain, John forced his mind to go over what happened aboard the Forerunner ship. After the explosion that started ripping up the control deck, a fracture down the exterior of the ship had reached all the way to the interior, which quickly spread. The main viewing window had shattered and he'd been shot out of the ship like a missile. There hadn't been much time to think once that occurred. The Master Chief had spotted a Pelican and grabbed a nearby piece of debris and hoped to hell he'd hit the ship.

John couldn't recall what happened next. He was certain he must have someone hit the Pelican, otherwise he would have fallen into orbit of Earth and burned through reentry, slamming into the surface with enough force to punch through a Covenant ship from head to toe.

"I wouldn't move around too much if I were you," a voice off to his left announced. John strained his neck and forced his eyes open. Kneeling down near him was a young girl wearing a flight suit. A frown creased his face when he realized that his helmet was missing, and he quickly shifted into a sitting position, pushing the pain that movement produced to the back of his mind.

He took a moment to take in the room before getting to his feet. This was some kind of flight deck, but it lacked any military identifications. He was about to inquire when he heard a gasp from behind him.

"Could you cover up or something?" the girl squeaked out as she hid her face in her hands. Confused, John glanced down and saw that it was not just his helmet that had been removed. All of the Mjolnir armor had been taken off, and what appeared to be a comforter had been laid across him when he was unconscious.

"Where is my suit?" the Master Chief asked as he looked for any other people in the room. From the simple decoration that adorned the place, it would appear to be a civilian craft, but it had been altered somewhat.

"In the next room," the girl answered, her hands still covering her face. "We couldn't see how badly you were hurt so we took it off."

The Master Chief didn't bother waiting and walked off to the door leading into the next deck. As the door slid open, he realized this room was filled with greater capacity. He drew a round of startled looks as he stood just inside the room. John glanced at each person before letting his gaze fall upon the table where his armor lay in disassembly.

He walked purposely to the table, the others that had been gathered around backed off quickly as if they thought he was heading for them. He picked up his wrist guard and noticed it was misshapen. John inwardly frowned, the majority of the suit was damaged, but not to a great degree. It should still function.

"Geez Jan, I asked you to look after him, not let him wander around naked," one of the men commented. The Master Chief turned slightly and saw the girl from the other room, looking embarrassed as she averted her gaze from him. The man that had spoken turned from the girl and looked at John. He opened his mouth to speak but as John's gaze fell upon him, his mouth clamped shut and he looked

uncomfortable.

Disregarding them for a moment, John began to suit up. He caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror located on the far bulkhead. His skin appeared a shade paler than he remembered. Incased in the Mjolnir suit, a Spartan did not receive any kind of sunlight, rendering their complexions to be mostly moonlight pale.

"Is this a civilian ship?" he asked as he began attaching his lower armor. It was uncomfortable and awkward, doing it by himself but he doubted the civilians aboard this ship had any idea how it worked. When he received no immediate response the Master Chief paused in his ministrations and looked at the assembled group.

"Yes," one of them finally answered. A young man, no older than 20 had replied. He looked somewhat scrawny, but there was something about his eyes that the Master Chief recognized.

"It's a yacht," the young girl elaborated. John had managed to fasten the lower armor and she seemed capable of looking at him now.

"I presume when the Covenant fleet entered the system there would have been a standing order for all civilians to seek shelter," the Master Chief commented. "If so, why were you in orbit? I understand that you have a desire to protect your home, but there is little you can do against the Covenant ships. They could blow this ship apart with one blast from their plasma cannons. You should stay on the ground and let soldiers handle the fighting."

As he snapped on the last gauntlet John noticed the almost crestfallen looks on their faces. There was little remorse within him, they would simply be throwing their lives away as cannon fodder for the Covenant fleet. He reached down to pick up his helmet when one of them slammed a fist upon the table.

"That's bullshit. There's no safe place anymore, and I sure as hell don't want my last few moments to be huddled inside some bunker waiting for a wave of plasma to burn the whole planet to cinders. Its better to go down fighting than doing nothing at all."

Finished attaching his helmet, John entered the suit's schematics and accessed the shield generator.

A loud snap echoed through the room that made the others jump. The air sizzled around the Master Chief as the Mjolnir suit struggled to cover his body with its shielding.

"If you wish to fight the Covenant, join the Corps. You'll be throwing your lives away acting like this."

There was stiffness, and a great deal of pain but the Master Chief felt no large abnormalities with his suit. The ability to fluctuate the shield strength was slightly unresponsive, but it still worked. Falling thousands of miles through space and slamming into a Pelican could have done worse to the suit as far as he was concerned.

"What good is the Corps?" a different one asked. "For all their blunder about strength and power, what have they done? The best they can do is stall the Covenant, hold them off while we run away. Retreat one more step while we lose planet by planet."

"Kevin calm down," the girl from before said, but was silenced by a glare from the boy.

"You can talk all high and mighty as much as you want Spartan, your kind doesn't do much either."

The Master Chief turned fully around and regarded the boy speaking.

"You Spartans were supposed to be our big secret weapons, the one thing that could help us turn the tide against the Covenant," he said angrily. "All you've done is exactly all anyone has done. Stall them. We've accessed ONI's databanks, we know about the other Spartans. Their gone, dead, every last one of them but you. They all died on Reach. All we have left is a last stand now, a pitched fight that everyone knows the outcome of."

John knew this boy's words should have registered with him. He was insulting the Spartans, his family, all of whom had died fighting an enemy they couldn't stop. That was his greatest failure. He was their leader, and he had let them all down.

Instead, he felt amusement. This boy reminded him of Fred, a Spartan that John had regarded as his second in command. Before the augmentations to their bodies Fred was always the most vocal about their assignments, speaking his mind and accessing the situation in the least pleasing way.

The occupants of the room tensed up when John took three steps and stood before the boy who had been talking. He didn't need to see their shocked faces when he clapped a hand upon the boys shoulder.

"Sometimes, even a pitched battle must be fought," John said, his voice soft. "I suppose I was wrong."

Shocked silence greeted him as his words registered with the others. He used that time to move across the room and stand before the girl that had been with him in the other room.

"How long was I unconscious after you recovered me?"

The girl stared up at him, her eyes seemingly trying to pierce through the visor and get a look at his face. John was used to it, being unable to work off of someone's facial reactions was a great annoyance for some people.

"Four hours, maybe a little more," she responded.

"I presume one of you saw the Forerunner ship explode, correct?" he asked, and received a nod from the girl. "Was the ship destroyed?"

"No, Iâ€¦" she paused and looked uncertain for a moment. "When the explosion hit our Pelican I was thrown in my seat and for a second it looked like the space around the ship was distorted somewhat, and then it just disappeared. Almost like it had entered Slip Space but it looked different somehow."

The Master Chief let loose a breath of relief with that information. Truth hadn't reached Earth yet. He turned an appraising eye to the girl and turned to look at the others. There was something about these kids he just couldn't pin down.

"What about the Covenant fleet? Are the MAC guns still holding out?" he asked next.

The girl looked confused for a moment.

"No, the guns are fine. After the ship you mentioned disappeared, the fleet backed off to the edge of the system. They're just waiting there for some reason."

John felt his eyebrows raise. A Covenant fleet backing off? That certainly did not sound normal, and it couldn't possible mean anything good for Earth.

"Lay some fire down that corridor Goddamnit!" Sergeant Johnson bellowed as he fired his M6C pistol at the small Flood parasite. The fight had been going for only a few minutes but already their unit was in danger of being overrun. "Cortana activate those plasma turrets and have them burn these bastards a new asshole."

"I could if you would kindly move away from the corridor, sergeant," Cortana explained as if speaking to a seven year old. Hearing her words the Elites and Grunts, along with Johnson, took a few final shots at the corridor and then hightailed it across the hanger. The turrets that had previously been used to fire at their dropship now aimed inside the ship and blasted down the corridors that contained the Flood.

After a few minutes of continuous plasma fire, the turrets ceased and all eyes turned to Cortana.

"Looks like there's a lull in the waves, I suggest moving through now but remain cautious."

That was all the incentive they needed. Plasma rifles held at the ready, the Arbiter led the other Elites into a corridor with Sergeant Johnson and Commander Keyes bringing up the rear. Cortana's image disappeared as she reentered the ship and followed them.

"Jesus Christ," Johnson whispered as they entered a communications relay station. Hundreds of Brute and Elite bodies were lined up against the walls, their bodies motionless aside from the parasitic form working its way inside their chest cavity.

The Arbiter and the other Elites looked on in sadness at the fallen Elites. Johnson and Keyes stood back, not used to seeing this emotion from any Elite.

"The parasite must burn for what they have done to our brothers," one of the Elites spoke. The others nodded assent as the Arbiter turned and seemed to look beyond the room.

"Construct, once we are aboard Honor Without Mercy, will it be possible for you to destroy this city as well as the Ring?"

"Yes," Cortana's voice answered hesitantly. "The problem with that is the activation sequence requires me to enter _In Amber Clad_ and do a remote detonation. It would take some time for me to punch myself out of the ships system, through High Charity and into _Honor Without Mercy_. There would be insufficient time for you to wait for me, then take off and get the others off the Ring before the reactors detonated."

"If I were to follow you in a dropship and then have you enter the ship and rejoin _Honor Without Mercy_ would that be sufficient?" the Arbiter asked.

"I believe so," Cortana responded.

"Now hold on," Johnson interjected. "If anyone's going to be escorting Cortana it'll be one of us humans."

"Are you a pilot," the Arbiter asked Johnson, then nodded towards Miranda. "I doubt either of you are coherent in our language, and we don't possess the time it would take to instruct either of you."

Johnson looked upset and was about to respond when he sighed.

"You gotta promise me one thing though," Johnson said. "Your dropship doesn't leave this city till she's on it. You got me?"

The Arbiter looked down into his face.

"I understand."

Author's Notes: Well, here's hoping that with my slight hiatus from writing those of you not caught up on the ilovebees situation managed to fill yourselves in, and are now ready to read the story, confusion free.

Please give me your thoughts.

Thanks to everyone who has read this story, and those that have reviewed.

6. The End of a War Chapter 5

Disclaimer: If I owned the Halo franchise you can bet Halo 3 would have been released November 10th.

The End of a War

Chapter 5

Old Acquaintances

"I will enter through the access way above the city, construct. Though I am a skilled pilot I request that you disrupt the Parasite's control over the defensive weaponry," the Arbiter explained as he disengaged the dropship from the gravity chamber and slowly piloted

it out of the docking bay.

"Already on it," Cortana responded tersely. The Arbiter's gruff mannerisms may have reminded her of the Master Chief, but his belief of her being nothing more than an object was starting to grate on her nerves. Or what constituted as her nervesâ€¦

Ignoring those thoughts for a moment she started her way through High Charity's access ways, working towards the location of _In Amber Clad._ She was tempted to go check on Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson but she pushed it aside. If they didn't want another run-in with the Flood, High Charity needed to be destroyed. The Arbiter may have been a skilled soldier but he was nowhere near the level of the Master Chief, which meant this task fell on her to complete.

The Forerunner ship had provided High Charity with its main source of power, something Cortana was still slightly in awe of, and now that it had been removed the city had changed to auxiliary power. It wouldn't be able to sustain itself for longer than a few days, and when it ran out, the city would become a lifeless husk. The Flood needed to be destroyed before then.

Cortana stretched herself to the very limits of her endurance as she sped up the speed as she tore down security probes and firewalls. There would be time to pour over these thoughts once the ships reactors had destabilized and they were safely away from the resulting detonation.

Sergeant Johnson slammed another clip into his remaining sub-machine gun. A carrier form that had possessed an Elite had slammed into him and crushed the other gun against the deck. It had been moments after the departure of Cortana and the Arbiter when the Flood was upon them again. Plasma and bullet rounds filled the air as they attempted to beat back the surging mass of enemies.

"Keep firing!" Johnson bellowed as he saw two infectious forms jump through one of the doorways and latch onto an Elite's neck. It prepared to slam its needle down into the throat when a round fired from Johnson's handgun slammed into it. It popped, spraying yellow liquid across the Elite.

"We can't hold them back forever!" Miranda Keyes shouted as she fired into the mass of Flood forms with her standard issue sidearm. The firing pin slammed into the empty chamber, and she quickly emptied the magazine and slapped a fresh one in. She turned to one of the Elites as she resumed firing. "Is there another route to the loading bay?"

The Elite turned shortly and looked about the room for a moment. They were in some kind of ceremonial chamber, the ceiling stretched further than the eye could see.

"There is an access way used by the Unggoy that will take us there," the Elite answered, pointing across the great hall towards a door. "It will be a narrow path though."

"It's bound to be better than this," Miranda muttered as she turned. "Johnson! We're moving out!"

"Aye aye Ma'am!" Sergeant Johnson shouted back. He flipped two fragmentation grenades from his ammo pouch and readied their firing pins before letting them fly. "Let's move it out!"

The Elite that had pointed out their escape led the way as they charged across the room firing behind them as they went. They poured through the doorway and continued running, but Johnson paused to fire several shots into the control panel beside the door.

"That ought to slow them down some," Johnson smirked as the panel short-circuited. His grin slipped when the door slammed open and stayed in that position.

"Ah shit!" he cursed as he took off after the others, glad no one else had seen that.

The Arbiter brought the dropship on a slow run across the top of High Charity. He steered it towards the top porthole that had been built to allow access for the Forerunner ship. The way was open, which brought a sigh of relief from him. Had it been closed it would have made for some very difficult maneuvering to find another access way.

"I am entering the city Construct," the Arbiter announced over the private com the human A.I had created. He had yet to fully understand what the Construct was and its true purpose, the humans referred to it as 'Cortana', obviously a name and not some kind of rank. It had the demeanor of a human, yet that seemed impossible. The Constructs that the High Council had prepared were mechanical, and had no personality at all. The thought that the humans could perhaps possess more advanced technology than the Covenant was troubling, though he could not fathom why it would trouble him so.

He had no ties to the Prophets or the rest of the Order. His only mission now was to eliminate every last one of the Jiralhanae, and to stop the Prophets from activating the Ark. There was no ill intentions directed at humankind anymore, he would prefer that such thoughts be rid from the other Elites and the other members of the Covenant that had joined their cause. The humans posed no threat, they never had, he realized.

'I have stained my hands with blood of innocents,' the Arbiter remarked to himself. The burning of countless human colonies and planets flashed through his mind and he felt an uncharacteristic grimace.

Back in his home, he had been brought up to believe in a code of honor, and how to conduct himself in battle. His father had been a high-ranking fleet commander before his death during the battle to tame the Hunters.

The Prophets had dictated what was honor, and now he realized too late that they had misdirected this code of beliefs and channeled it to suit their own needs.

'When the Jiralhanae have been dealt with, and the Prophets stopped, I will accept what the humans wish for our payment to their dead. If

it be death, then my life shall be given.'

That thought did not seem to startle him, nor did it seem to cause any discomfort.

"I'm inside _In Amber Clad _now," the Constructs voice echoed throughout the cockpit. "I should have the reactors ready in a few moments."

"Understood, I'll bring the dropship along the human vessel now."

As he brought the dropship closer, something began to tickle at the back of the Arbiter's mind. His skin began to tingle and he recognized the feeling. There was a threat near, and it was getting closer.

The Arbiter's hand dipped down to his waist and he gripped the energy sword. With surprising grace he slipped out of the pilot's seat just as a large tentacle slammed down, crushing it. He triggered the blade and was rushing towards the tentacle as concentrated plasma burst forth. With a quick slice he severed the tentacle in two, and winced as something screamed with rage.

"Your efforts are for nothing, there is naught but death waiting for you."

The voice came from all around him, as if it was inside the cockpit, but he knew better. The Parasite leader must have discovered their intent.

"You will pay for the death of my brothers, parasite," the Arbiter said, his mandibles snapping tightly on the last word.

"It seems your mind has cleared of its delusion," Gravemind's voice echoed. "Though you now delude yourself with this resistance. The key has not turned, so now it is our turn to rain dominance upon the universe."

"I welcome you to try," the Arbiter snarled. His gaze snapped over to the tentacle that he had severed, and was surprised to see nothing there. He held no false pretences over his chances against the parasite leader, but if he could buy some time for the Construct to destroy the human vessel it would not matter.

That thought made him quickly look out the cockpit towards the human ship as it grew larger and larger as the dropship continued its approach unheeded. He stowed the energy blade as he rushed to the controls and quickly brought the dropship out of its dive, leveling it off and merely brushing roughly against the human ship.

"The Parasite leader is here Construct," the Arbiter informed over the com. He received no response.

Cortana was unable to respond but it didn't matter. She was already well aware of Gravemind's presence. _In Amber Clad_'s defensive protocols had nearly been out of the way when she felt something tug at her. She had felt it before, when the Master Chief had been

catching up with Truth through the city.

"This city holds far too many secrets for its destruction to be tolerated," Gravemind's voice filled her senses.

She threw the last probe that was necessary to break the last defensive protocol and waited in disbelief as it was stopped. The tug on her grew in strength and her movement was stopped completely.

Cortana couldn't reach the ship's schematics, which meant she couldn't destroy the generators. Her options were extremely limited.

'Dammit, the bastard couldn't have waited 30 seconds longer,' she internally fumed as she sent a spike to try to break the hold. It fizzled and disappeared without so much as a dent.

There was one other option she had, though she was somewhat loath to use it. If she copied herself, she could send it to activate the ships defenses, and maybe divert Gravemind's attention long enough to slip free. The problem with that was copying herself used up a tremendous amount of power, and it affected her long-term life span.

'Oh well, there's not much else to lose I suppose,' she thought to herself as she initiated the copying sequence. She continued her fruitless struggling for show as she waited for the sequence to end.

"Gotcha."

She immediately sent the copy through the ships internal grid towards the defensive weapons where it activated the mini-MAC gun and fired it. It was malfunctioning already, and firing it without any preamble nearly tore it apart.

The diversion did its job though, and Cortana felt Gravemind's hold slip and she broke free.

It was time to go to work.

Commander Miranda Keyes felt a wave of emotion wash over her as their group poured into the docking bay and her eyes took in the Covenant flagship. This hellish experience was almost over.

The second that thought crossed her mind she cursed, as Flood began pouring out of the ship towards them. She grabbed a spare plasma rifle from the ground, her M6C sidearm had long since been depleted of ammo, and began firing as the others followed suit. Her mind felt numb after the near endless stream of gunfire which ripped and tore into the Flood, who in turn fired back.

Her gaze slipped over to Johnson, who was brandishing a Covenant energy blade now, tearing into carrier forms with an almost primal like violence.

'_How can he always be so ready to fight, to throw his life on the line over and over again?_' Keyes asked herself as she directed fire away from the ship to a new line of Flood appearing through a ventilation shaft. The sergeant had been a soldier since he was 17 according to his records, and he had been in countless battles over the years. The man was only a step below the Spartans when it came to medals for bravery and skill in battle.

The fight above Earth, and the encounters while they had tried to acquire in the index aboard Installation 05, those were her first battles ever. Already she felt like screaming over the sheer horror of it all. Young Marines had been shot, burned, and torn apart before her eyes, and she was sure the images would never leave her. Her spirit had been drained, knowing all those that she had commanded only a few days before were dead, or consumed by the Flood. If it had not been for the natural desire to survive, Miranda was uncertain whether or not she would have made it this far.

"Its the Major!" an Elite exclaimed, pointing across the bay. Keyes turned and looked, and indeed there the Elite officer was, an carbine in his hands as he mowed down a wall of Flood. The rest of his team spilled into the bay and with their combined efforts the Floods ranks began to thin.

"That's how you do it!" Johnson exclaimed as he advanced out of cover and he started towards the docked ship. Miranda watched him and shouted out a warning as a carrier form dropped down from above, landing behind him. In its hands was a sub-machine gun.

"Sergeant!" Keyes shouted as Johnson caught a burst in his back, and stumbled for a moment before crashing heavily to the deck. Major Ekaporamee leapt into the fray and cut down the carrier form with a short burst from a plasma rifle. Miranda wasted no time in dashing out of cover to Johnson's fallen form.

The Major reloaded his carbine as he approached Johnson, reaching down to flip him over onto his back. Keyes was about to shout her protest when she saw Johnson move.

"Fuck," Johnson cursed as blood dribbled down from his mouth.

"Hold still sergeant, we can get you some help when were aboard the ship," Keyes said. "I'll grab some biofoam to seal the wounds up."

"Don't worry about it," Johnson coughed out from the ground where he attempted to regain his breath.

Miranda turned on him. "This is no time for stupid heroics!"

"That's," Johnson coughed heavily once more as he lifted himself up into a seated position. "That's not what I mean."

Before she could ask what he meant, Johnson lifted his tunic and showed them his chest. The four shots he had taken in the back had gone through clean, creating exit holes on his front. Despite the large quantity of blood that had spilt down his chest, the exit marks had nearly sealed up completely, leaving no distinguishing marks behind.

"You are immortal?" Major Ekaporamee asked in astonishment. Miranda could only stare in shock.

"Not quite, but I'm almost there," Johnson said, his voice no longer constrained. "I got a little gift from the Flood after our first meeting."

Keyes watched as Johnson got to his feet and glanced around the bay. He looked at her once and saw the look in her eyes.

"I'll explain later ma'am, for now we better get on this ship."

The Flood had been beaten back, but the horrible twisted screams of the carrier forms carried down the corridors and into the docking bay, informing them that reinforcements were on the way. They clambered into the ship, deactivating the gravity lift once the last Elite was aboard.

"Where is the Arbiter?" the Major asked once they were all aboard.

"He's taking care of the clean-up with Cortana," Johnson informed him. Ekaporamee looked at the other Elites and they nodded, confirming what he said.

"We'll need to split into teams once more," Major Ekaporamee informed them. "There cannot be any Flood remaining on this ship once we enter Slip Space."

Keyes and several Elites went to the control center, and began to prepare the ship for flight. Miranda had received only the rudimentary training protocols in Covenant language, something she was regretting now. The Elites seemed to take pity on her and one of them sat her down at a reconnaissance station. He pointed out the simple controls and quickly returned to his station.

Keyes let her hands experiment with the controls and several screens appeared in front of her.

'_These are the insides of the ship.' _She began to explore the different video feeds from the ship. There had been no sign of cameras or any other device from when she had entered the ship, which meant the Covenant must have it built into the actual walls using fiber optics of some kind.

"Fascinating," she whispered to herself. The screens shifted and changed, becoming different compartments of the ship. One of the screens caught her eye. The room was huge, it appeared to be some kind of ceremonial chamber but she couldn't tell. The feed was distorted, and in the far end of the chamber there was something, moving. Before she could get a good idea the picture flickered once before fading completely, shortly being replaced with a different feed.

Her mind began to race as she tried to figure out what it is she just saw.

'_First things first,' _she decided, '_I'd better let Johnson and the others know about this.' _Miranda opened up a com channel with

Johnson and the other teams.

"This is Commander Keyes calling all search teams. I've located something on the ship's security system, inside a ceremonial chamber."

'This is Major Ekaporamee,' a voice responded over the com. 'Can you describe what you saw?'

"Negative, all I can say is that it was big," Keyes answered. "The feed was disrupted somehow."

'Understood, we'll go check it out.'

The ship began to shake, and Keyes glanced out the viewing bay to see that the ship was leaving the docking bay. She felt the pressure as Honor Without Mercy sped away from High Charity and headed towards Halo.

"You can try as long as you wish parasite, but your death is near."

The Arbiter cast a pair of wary eyes around the interior of the ship. After that first attempt to kill him, he had yet to see any sign of the parasite leader again. Its taunts had faded shortly afterwards as well, leaving uneasy silence to fill the void.

"Construct have you finished your task?" he asked over the com.

'I'm into the system now,' Cortana responded. 'All I have to do is set the timer for when the reactors will blow.'

"Good, do so and link up with my ship and we will leave."

'There's a problem,' Cortana said, her voice tight. 'That Gravemind thing has had access with the monitor of the installation, and by now possesses almost all the information it knew. When the Master Chief and I were on Installation 04 the monitor of that site was able to stop the detonation of our ship's reactors, forcing us to do a remote detonation.'

"You believe the parasite could stop the countdown?" the Arbiter asked. If that was so, there would be only one other alternative.

'I'm certain,' Cortana responded. 'For us to safely get away from High Charity and to link up with the others we'd need at least seven minutes. That leaves too much of a window for it to be tampered with. I'd have to recommend doing a detonation with no time limit.'

"Guaranteeing our deaths," the Arbiter said, mostly to himself.

'I can stay in control long enough for you to debark and link up with Honor Without Mercy.'

"Where are the others at the moment?"

'They've picked up the last of those on the ring, they're heading towards the rendezvous point as we speak,' Cortana informed him. 'Don't worry about Commander Keyes and Johnson, they will understand you had no choice.'

The Arbiter returned to the dropships cockpit and stood before the controls.

"You will have to explain it to them yourself Construct. I promised him I would return with you, or I wouldn't return at all. A warrior does not break a promise made with another warrior."

He almost smiled at the stupefied silence that greeted him.

'Maybe you two aren't so different after all,' Cortana's voice was almost soft.

"Set the countdown for 45 seconds and then rejoin with the dropship."

'That will barely give us enough time to get the ship out of _High Charity_, ' Cortana said. 'The ship will be crushed by the shockwaves and the resulting debris.'

The Arbiter did smile this time as he powered up the dropship and made sure the engines were running smoothly.

"I believe I said before that I was a skilled pilot. We will be alright, besides, this city shall not become my grave."

Cortana was silent for a moment. She was back in a flash.

'Countdown started, 45 seconds and counting. Linking up with dropship now.' Another pause. 'Done.'

The Arbiter wasted no time on words as he powered the engines and set them on a straight course for the outer wall of the city. The fighting between the Covenant earlier had done substantial damage to the structure of _High Charity_ and he was looking for an area that had gotten the worst of it.

'23 seconds remaining,' Cortana announced as the ship headed straight for a damaged section of the wall.

"If you had a body Construct, I would have recommended you hold on tight," the Arbiter said as the ship slammed into and through the damaged wall.

'5 seconds.'

The Arbiter took one glance over at the ring as he powered the thrusters. For a device that held so many sins, it was certainly a wonderful object to behold.

In Amber Clad's reactors failed, resulting in a chain reaction of malfunctions that quickly spiraled out of control. The fusion cores went first, which set off the reactors. The explosion generated, shook _High Charity_ to its core even as it began to tear it apart. The auxiliary power that the city was powered by went next, and the explosion was bright enough to blind those that were not even facing

it.

The dropship that held an Elite and an AI was quickly engulfed by the shockwave, and shortly thereafter disappeared from view when the debris caught up.

Author's Notes: Well a slightly longer than usual chapter, which I hope makes up for the wait. You may have noticed that I dropped the rating back down, a result of a comment made in a review, and my own investigation. It seems that compared to many other PG-13 stories mine is quite tame, so well I suppose to make it easier for those that don't have me on their alert list or this story in their favorites I'll keep it where it is.

Thanks to everyone who takes the time to read this story, and a special thanks to everyone that reviews. While I'm not a review whore like other authors, they do really help make the writing process easier knowing that you've got people that like the story waiting for the next installment.

You guys are the best.

7. The End of a War Chapter 6

Disclaimer: I am but a wannabe writer trying to kill time waiting for Halo 3. I own nothing.

The End of a War

Chapter 6

Kicking Ass and Taking Names

Where am I?

The Arbiter stood before a great structure. Its architecture was flawless in design, leaving him breathless as he gazed up at its splendor. His body felt compelled to climb the staircase that led towards it, and he found no reason to question the feeling. As he grew closer, he realized just how large the structure was.

What is this place?

The entrance was enormous, and the doors were parted. He entered with no compunction and found himself stunned once he crossed into the threshold. The room seemed ancient, yet advanced at the same time. Design so simple in nature that it was complex. There was much he wished to see and absorb, yet once again his body felt the desire to move on, as if his time here was limited.

Am I dead?

It seemed as if it had been designed with ceremonial thoughts. Every step he took, the Arbiter felt as if he was walking on something holy, and to be revered. He walked through a hallway, grand in design and limitless from his viewpoint. Archways appeared periodically and seemed to cast no shadow upon the ground. The Arbiter could not

locate what provided light inside the hall, yet he knew it existed for no area was left covered by darkness.

Why am I here?

Abruptly the hallway ended, and another pathway stood before him. Once again the doors were parted so he stepped inside. This room was something he had seen before. It resembled the chamber that he had killed Tartarus in, and witnessed the truth of what the Great Journey truly was. This chamber was different though, it was smaller. The Arbiter walked down the path that led to the controls, where the index had needed to be placed.

Am I reliving my past?

He walked off to view the center of the room. There was an adjacent pathway that led around the circumference of the room. As he started down it, he heard voices behind him. The Arbiter turned and looked surprised to see several figures standing before the controls. They were shrouded by a haze that seemed to cover the room, obscuring his vision. He watched as one of them accessed the controls, while two others seemed to argue in the background. The center of the chamber sprung to life as a hologram appeared filling the room with an incandescent light. It was a moment before the Arbiter could make out what the hologram was.

By the Gods.

Seven rings now filled the chamber, in no form of alignment. He recognized it though. The Oracle had shown him this before, this same vision of the Holy Rings.

Is this the Ark?

The figure at the controls began to work furiously at them. The images of the rings changed and icons appeared over each ring. Two of the rings changed design and disappeared, leaving only five. There appeared text over each ring, in a language the Arbiter did not understand. The meaning was understood though, and he felt a stab of dread.

Firing solution accepted. Activation protocols commencing.

They are activating the rings!

The image faded, and the room became devoid of life once again. The fear that the vision had brought stayed with him, as he slumped to the ground. His head bowed he stared down looking for solace, and received nothing. The touch of a hand upon his shoulder startled him and he glanced up.

Nothing was there, and quickly looked around him but he was still alone. As he wondered over the touch a voice suddenly filled his senses. It spoke in a language he had never heard but he understood it, almost as if it was speaking inside his mind.

"This is not the past, only a possible future. You must not continue our mistakes, do not follow our paths. Do not repeat our sins."

The Arbiter felt consciousness fade around him as the room sifted.

The voice still echoing in his mind.

Do not repeat our sins. Do not repeat our sins. Do not repeat

-

Flames lashed out at his body as his eyes snapped open. Shouting in surprise he rolled away from the heat, only to discover it was all around him.

"Arbiter!" Cortana exclaimed from somewhere inside the cockpit. He forced his eyes closed against the heat. His left arm was sending unending pain through his nervous system, informing him that he had been burnt severely.

"Do something about these flames!" the Arbiter bellowed, his throat producing a rough parched voice that sent him into a hacking fit. He began to breathe in the smoke the fire produced which sent him into a body-wracking heaving fit. His lungs were burning in his chest, and he knew that unless he got out of the smoke-filled room he would soon suffocate.

"Wait a moment," Cortana said, and in a few seconds Halon began to fill the room, squashing most of the flames. The cockpit doors opened and the oxygen vents began venting the smoke out of the cockpit. In less than a minute the air was breathable once again.

"What's the ship's status?" he asked, lifting himself off the ground to slump against the copilot's seat.

"Structural integrity 13, thruster's offline, massive damage to gravity lift, fires aboard hulls two through four. Engines are critical and the power core has a fracture. For all intents and purposes we are dead in space."

"Are the others still at the rendezvous?"

"Yes, but communications are offline, and our current trajectory will carry us past them."

_Honor Without Mercy will stay at the rendezvous for only a short while longer. We must link up with them if we are going to have any hope of surviving. _

The Arbiter accessed the controls from the copilot's seat, ignoring the stinging pain in his arm.

"Bring the engines up to 7 efficiency and prepare to activate a slow turn towards _Honor Without Mercy_, " he ordered.

"If the engines are powered for more than 4 minutes this ship will tear itself apart," Cortana warned.

"We'll have to take that risk, Construct," the Arbiter said. Cortana was silent for a moment.

"Engines online."

The Arbiter exhaled loudly and brought the ship into a slow bank that

would bring them into contact with the others.

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'Give me a status Johnson,' Keyes voice ordered over the battle net.

Sergeant Johnson held up his fist signaling the others to hold up.

"We've cleared alpha and omega deck, ma'am; we're on our way to link up with the other team handling the lower decks."

'Major Ekaporamee is handling Flood containment on deck three; I need you to head over there and see what's keeping him from answering his radio.'

"Roger that," Johnson acknowledged as he got back to his feet. "Slight change of plans guys, were heading up to deck three to check on the Major."

The three Elites, a pair of Hunters, and a squad of Grunts gave their understanding and followed Johnson as they changed directions and headed east.

Flood resistance had been weaker than expected. Aside from a few scattered engagements there had been sparse action so far, which did nothing to set them at ease. If anything it made the stress more evident on everyone's faces.

Johnson ran a hand briefly across his brow, taking the time to adjust the Marine Corps cap on his head. The Covenant Dissidents, as he had now begun to refer to the Elites, Hunters, and Grunts, were still not adjusted to his presence but at least they did not seem to be hostile anymore. He had risked his neck more than once to save several of them that had gotten sloppy and nearly been pierced by a carrier form.

Though the fighting had been sparse, the Flood still proved to be a skilled opponent. They set traps and lured them into tight quarters where it was easy to bunch up and become swarmed. Johnson knew that if not for the invulnerability to the Flood that he possessed, he might already have been killed by now. The regenerative properties the infectious form had left in him on the first installation had been a blessing. Skilled soldier though he may be, the number of battles that he had participated in should have put a death sentence on his head.

Battle was what defined Sergeant Johnson though and if he had his way; he would fire the last shot of the last war.

They crossed up to the third deck and followed Johnson as he continued towards the navigation indicator of the Major's last known whereabouts. Once he was within 15 feet of the indicator, Johnson felt something akin to a tingle run down his spine.

"Hold up," he ordered quickly as he lent against the wall. A veteran soldier knows not to take such instances lightly, especially when they had kept him alive through countless battles.

Keeping his grip tight on the rifle, he took several cautionary steps towards the doors that led into the next room. The feeling seemed to become more and more evident the closer he got to the navigation indicator.

"There's something in the next room," Johnson informed the others, then pointed to the pair of Hunters. "You two go on point and be prepared for anything. I don't think were dealing with just the Flood here."

The Hunters assumed point and didn't waste any time charging into the next room. Johnson followed close behind, his eyes fixated on where the nav point was. As he expected the major wasn't there, but there was certainly a great deal of blood. As he shifted his gaze Johnson got his first good look at the room.

It was easily the largest hull on the ship, spanning nearly a kilometer in length. The design was ceremonial, and once again Johnson found himself wondering why the Covenant had to always create so much circumstance whenever they did something.

His musings were cut off however, when his eyes fell on what was situated at the end of the chamber.

"What the fuck?"

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Jan knew she had to have been crazy when she asked to give the Spartan a lift back to Cairo station. The chances of some military official asking what the hell a 17 year old girl was doing driving a Spartan around were probably pretty high. What made her even more crazy, was that she wanted to stay with the Spartan instead of returning to the yacht with Kevin and the others.

Fighting in space, driving around just waiting for a Covenant ship to obliterate her with one shot, was not the way she wanted to fight. Fighting with a gun in her hands was just about the only usefulness she'd have in this war. That was why she'd told Kevin that she wouldn't be coming back after dropping the Spartan off. Durga was going to continue supplying them with information, which was pretty much the real reason she'd been asked to come along in the first place.

"Thanks for the lift," the Spartan said as he got up from the co-pilots seat and began to exit out the back.

"Wait a sec!" Jan called after him as she hastily unclipped herself and followed after him. The Spartan was standing with an air of impatience, though it was hard to tell since she couldn't see his face.

"Something wrong?" the Spartan asked.

Jan suddenly found the floor very interesting as she fidgeted with the hem of her shirt.

Why the hell am I acting like such a stupid ditzy schoolgirl for?_ He's a goddamn Spartan, its not like I need to skirt around the issue._

"I would like to continue on with you. I'm more use as a soldier than a pilot."

The Spartan stared at her a moment before turning away.

"Its too dangerous, go back to your friends."

"Ah, hey at least give it some consideration!" Jan shouted as she hopped down out of the Pelican to follow him. The Spartan stopped, turned and looked intently at her.

"There, I've considered it. Still too dangerous, go home," the Spartan said simply. Though Jan knew better, she swore there was a hint of amusement in his deadpan voice.

"But, umâ€|ah," she struggled for something to say before falling on the perfect excuse. "You owe me!"

The Spartan looked down at her and seemed to shake his head. Jan wasn't much for getting talked down to, even if it was a Spartan.

"Don't shake your head at me buddy. If it weren't for me pulling your mangled corpse off the Pelican when I did you would have died. I think I'm entitled to a little leeway here."

There was a long silence as the Spartan considered her words, or at least that's what Jan was hoping he was doing.

"Fine, but don't expect this to be a walk in the park."

Jan inwardly cheered over the victory but placed a solemn look on the outside.

"I can hold my own."

The Spartan merely turned and continued on his way, Jan tailing close behind. The Cairo Station had taken quite a beating for the past few days, and maintenance crews were scrambling to get it patched up for whenever the Covenant decided to rejoin the fight. Jan and the Spartan were forced to cross several maintenance walkways as they headed for the bridge.

"I'm Jan James by the way," Jan said, realizing that she hadn't introduced herself yet. The Spartan gave no sign of having heard her. "Um, do you have a last name, or rank?"

"Master Chief," he responded shortly. Jan came to the conclusion that the Spartan wasn't one to mince words.

"Master Chief, got it," Jan said, nodding self-consciously. "You can just call me Jan."

"Fine," the Master Chief responded, entering the next room and after seeing what was inside, decided to pick up his pace. Jan hastened after him, confused, until she saw the other soldiers. They were ODST soldiers, if her memory of military units was correct, and from the way they were glaring at the Chief they obviously didn't think too highly of him.

"Would you look at that," one soldier remarked to another close by, just loud enough for them to hear. "We risk our balls protecting the MAC guns while he's out gallivanting around picking up some entertainment for later."

Jan was already turning to let the jackass have it the second the words left his mouth, but was stopped when a hand clamped down on her shoulder.

"Let it go," the Master Chief warned, but Jan shook him off and stalked up to the soldier.

"Excuse me," Jan said, her voice purposely sweet. "I couldn't help overhearing your observations there, and I was wondering if I might be able to help clear a few things up."

The ODST looked at her in amusement before smirking and motioning his hands.

"Go right ahead."

She grabbed his outstretched left hand and had firmly planted her elbow in his solar plexus while she pivoted on her right foot and hefted the soldier, flinging him over her shoulder to slam into the bulkhead. The soldier that had been the recipient of the others comment took a wild swing at Jan but his fist was knocked aside and she kicked him hard in the pubic arch. She didn't hit it hard enough to crack the bone, but he would certainly be sitting funny for the next couple of days.

"Anyone else got something to say?" Jan asked the other ODST's, who were too surprised to really offer an opinion. She smiled sweetly at them and walked briskly back to where the Master Chief stood waiting for her.

"Your pretty good," he said as they resumed walking.

"You should see me with a weapon," Jan said, her voice smooth and confident. They walked in silence for a while before she remembered something that had bothered her. "So why aren't you liked by the regular soldiers?"

The Master Chief was silent but then let loose something akin to a sigh.

"I have no problem with the regular Marines, it's the ODST's that have a problem with me," he explained.

"Well that's bullshit, what's their problem? An inferiority complex?" Jan asked, surprised that the thought of some group of soldiers despising the Spartan simply because of his skills made her so upset.

"It's not their fault," the Master Chief said, surprising her. "They're trained to believe that they're the best there is. Something that challenges that belief, especially a controversial group of soldiers like the Spartans will most likely cause for some conflict."

"But what does it matter who's best?" Jan asked. "Aren't we all fighting for the same cause? Who the hell cares about that stuff?"

The Master Chief didn't comment right away, and Jan was sure that if he wasn't wearing that helmet she'd see a smile plastered on his face.

"There are many who wished the Spartan 2.0 project would never have seen the light of day, Jan," he explained, using her name for the first time. "If it wasn't for the outbreak of the Covenant war than I doubt us Spartans would have been around for very long."

Jan was silent, trying to understand the implications of what the Master Chief was telling her. Maybe her dad hadn't been so paranoid as she thought.

"But that should be all moot now right? The Spartans are what's keeping us alive in this war, your track record is the best in the entire military. You guys are invincible."

"No," the Master Chief said, so forcibly that Jan was taken aback. "We aren't invincible. The Office of Naval Intelligence has put on a propaganda campaign to keep the true facts of the war out of civilian knowledge. When Reach fell, I was the only Spartan to escape. The others died in combat."

"What?" Jan felt the color drain from her face. "You're the last one?"

The Master Chief didn't respond, he merely increased his pace as they neared the bridge. Jan followed him, speechless, her mind repeating his words over and over again.

"Ah Master Chief, its good to see you."

Jan quickly came back to reality and looked around. They were now standing in the bridge of the Cairo station. The man addressing the Master Chief stood at the far end of the room glancing at a hologram of the stations infrastructure.

"Its good to be back sir," the Master Chief said, his hand snapping reflexively up into a salute.

"When that Forerunner ship exploded and then disappeared we were worried that you'd been killed," Admiral Hood said, waving them over. He noticed Jan for the first time. "Who is this?"

"A civilian sir," the Master Chief said bluntly. "She picked me up in a Pelican before I hit reentry in Earth."

"Good work young lady," the Admiral smiled. "You've protected our greatest asset."

"Yeah," Jan remarked, uncomfortable with the attention. She wasn't impressed with the military itself, but this admiral seemed to almost command respect with his persona.

"Have you been brought up on what's happened so far?" the Admiral asked, turning his attention back to the Chief.

"I received a brief run through sir."

"I'll take you through again just to bring you up to speed then," Admiral Hood said, moving towards the hologram map of the defenses surrounding Earth. "About four hours before that Forerunner ship showed up, a Covenant armada entered the far end of the system from Slip Space. We had mopped up the previous force the a few hours earlier and were in the middle of repairs when they arrived."

Admiral Hood retrieved a pointer and used it to indicate several of the MAC guns.

"I ordered the realignment of two new MAC guns to replace the Malta and the Athens. They were in position just as the Covenant were upon us. The force was once again smaller than I expected, but they were tenacious, almost as if they wanted to destroy the Orbital Defense Grid completely this time before moving onto Earth. I suppose they wanted to make way for that Forerunner ship you arrived in. Despite the relatively small size of the armada, we were taking a pounding. It looked like we were going to lose the MAC guns when you showed up in that ship."

The Admiral said a series of coordinates to a Yeoman nearby and the image changed, this time showing a large cluster of Covenant ships at the end of the system.

"When you set off that explosion aboard the Forerunner ship, it through all communications out of commission for almost five minutes, which sent the Covenant ships into disarray. We started to gain the upper hand but when that subsequent explosion occurred, the Covenant backed off. They've been waiting at the end of the system for a few hours, and our scanners are showing their communicating like crazy with one another."

"Most likely trying to find the Forerunner ship," the Master Chief commented.

"That's what were assuming too," Admiral Hood nodded. "As much as I'd like to chase the bastards right into the hell were barely managing repairs as it is. When they decide to jump back into the fight were going to be in a tight spot."

Admiral Hood turned to the Master Chief and pointed at him.

"That's where you come in Chief. I can't spare any troops right now to delay the Covenant fleet from jumping back into battle, so I'm sending you. With the Covenant in disarray it should be possible to get in close enough with a Pelican or maybe a Longshore fighter and board one of their destroyers. Once your inside I want you to do what you can to keep the Covenant from returning to battle, and whatever information you can gather about the whereabouts of that Forerunner ship too."

The Master Chief snapped another salute and bellowed out, "Yes sir!"

As the Chief turned to leave the Admiral laid a hand down on his shoulder.

"Once we've taken care of the fleet, I'll authorize one of our carriers to head to the coordinates you gave me where the other Halo Installation was and we'll retrieve all the survivors," the Admiral said, his voice gruff but soft. "ONI won't like it, but by the time I get around to informing them the ship will probably be on its way back home."

"Thank you sir," the Master Chief said, and Jan could tell he really meant it. The emotion in that simple phrase was so deep that she began to wonder if the classification of Spartans as cold, calculated killing machines was off target.

They exited the bridge and began the long trek back to the Pelican.

"I suppose you'll need a driver again right?" Jan asked, trying to keep the hopefulness off her features.

The Master Chief stopped completely this time, and regarded her.

"You do realize that this is not going to be a mission that even I expect to survive right?" he asked. Jan nodded and smiled at him. "Alright then, we'll get you suited up and grab some gear before heading out."

Jan nodded, but suddenly realized that she was actually heading into combat. As much as she had wanted this, being faced with the actual situation, she found herself coming up short.

"Don't worry," the Master Chief's voice startled her. "You'll be alright."

She smiled to herself. As gruff and unfeeling as he may of liked to appear, Jan could see that he had more emotions than he liked to show. His strength may have lain in his training, but to be the last of his kind, he had to have known true loneliness, something Jan felt she could empathize with.

They may have been completely different from one another, but high above Earth, heading out towards certain death, Janissary James and the Master Chief found a kinship neither of them expected.

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Author's Notes: Sorry about the cliffhanger with Johnson and the others. They'll get a bit more attention next chapter. Same with the Chief, we'll go back into his head to see just why he's taking Jan along with him.

Well, I got this chapter out pretty quickly, and its in good form I think. Thanks to everybody that reviews, you guys really motivated me to get this chapter out as soon as possible, so give yourselves a pat on the back.

The End of a War

Chapter 7

The Man Said "Duck!" I heard "Stand up"

"What the hell is that?"

Sergeant Johnson felt an emotion he hadn't come across in a long time. Raw fear flooded his being and he took a shaky step backwards. Never in his life had he ever felt the urge to flee so strongly before.

Not when he had faced the Covenant across the battlefield for the first time. Not when he had seen Reach burning. Not even when he had felt the Flood parasite puncture his neck and move inside his body. Nothing had ever struck so deep within him.

The convoluted mass at the end of the chamber sent tendrils of true horror lacing through him. The brief description Cortana and the Arbiter had given had not been sufficient to prepare him for what he now faced. He forced himself to stay calm, despite his mind screaming at him to call for a retreat and leave the ceremonial chamber at once.

The pair of Hunters that had led the charge into the room had been taken aback as well. Their eyes fell upon the twisted and mangled bodies of the Hunters that had been with the Major's team and any thoughts of retreat slipped from their minds. The fuel rod guns they carried were charging even as they let loose a battle roar and began charging across the chamber towards the creature.

"Shit," Johnson cursed as he tried to get his body to move. The Elites behind him were snapped from their stupor at the site of the enraged Hunters and they moved to engage as well. Plasma screamed across the chamber and slammed into the creature, spraying yellow secretion onto the floor.

A mass of tentacles appeared from within the creature and lashed out. One of the Hunters was slammed into the deck, the audible crack made Johnson wince as the floor gave way even as the Hunter's heavy armor was crushed. The remaining Hunter roared with primal fury as his fuel rod was leveled and fired down the chamber, searing a large wound onto the creature. Another tentacle lashed out and the remaining Hunter was killed.

The Elites backed off from their suicidal charge. Sense returned to them and they quickly split into two squads and advanced from two separate directions. One of the Elites began firing at the creature with a carbine, only to have one of the many tentacles sweep across and send him skidding across the hull, before finally slamming into the wall.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why can't I move?

Johnson watched helplessly as one of the squads was beaten savagely into the deck. Even from the other side of the chamber he could hear the sound of bones shattering. The screams of the unfortunate Elites were drowned out as a tentacle slammed down once more, shaking the deck.

The remaining group of Elites backed off and high-tailed it back to where Johnson stood, rooted to the ground.

"What should we do?" one of them questioned. "Attacking serves only to provoke the beast."

"Go," Johnson said, glad that at least his mouth was able to work. "Go get some reinforcements."

"You cannot hope to defeat this creature by yourself human," an Elite commented. Johnson nearly smirked. He happened to agree with the alien, but he couldn't move to assist the others, let alone run through the entire ship hoping the communications came back online.

"Trust me," he said simply. The Elites glanced at one another for a moment before dashing out of the room. Johnson knew running from an enemy for the Elites was probably almost as bad as staying and getting mutilated like the others. He felt his body give an involuntary shudder as his gaze fell back onto the end of the chamber.

"Bravery is empty without wisdom."

Johnson felt another shudder as the creature's voice echoed within the room, devoid of life. He took a deep breath and forced himself to begin walking forward, his weapon slung limply across his shoulder.

"Your that thing the Arbiter was talking about before, the leader of the Flood."

"I am not their leader," its voice sounded amused. "They are me, as I am them. We are all one consciousness."

"You control them though don't ya?" Johnson asked. "Its by your will that they hunt us."

"It is our purpose, what we were designed for. Our creators sought salvation of life, but what they received was death incarnate."

Johnson felt his knees start to go weak as he grew closer, and more of the creature became visible. It was massive, nearly filling a quarter of the chamber.

"If they wanted salvation, then how come they created you?"

"Destruction is creation. We are what they strived for, what they desired to become."

Johnson was starting to get worried. Whatever reinforcements those Elites were getting wasn't getting here fast enough. This creature spoke in riddles, and he was having a hard enough time keeping its attention.

"Why would they want to become like you?"

Something that sounded like laughter filtered out from the creature.

"They wanted what we possessed," the creature said. "When power is absolute, there are no limitations."

He finally stopped walking. Johnson now stood not more than twenty feet from it. The disgusting aroma of rotten flesh assaulted him but he maintained his composure. If this thing was going to tear him to shreds then he'd at least meet it head on.

"Absolute power huh?" Johnson quoted. "You don't look so tough to me."

"Our creators dreamed of eternity, yet we gave them damnation. Their reach surpassed their grasp and from their sins, we were born."

Johnson's eyes drifted away from the creature and he spotted the mangled corpse of an Elite nearby. It was Major Ekaporamee. From where he stood, Johnson could tell he took a hell of a beating before going down. A shattered energy blade was still clutched in his right hand.

Shame flooded the sergeant at that moment. He had stood by, rooted to the ground with fear as fellow warriors had fought and died in battle.

Reaching around, Johnson slung the pump-handled shotgun into his hands, and worked the action.

"I've never been very good with words. The only way I can express myself is on the battlefield, fighting an enemy with everything I've got," Johnson said, his voice tight as he looked down at the desecrated bodies of the Elites. "These soldiers may not have been my friends, but they were comrades, and right here and now, I'm going to avenge them."

A laugh spilled forth from the Flood.

"Then come human, attack. Let your blood, spilt upon this ground signal our dominion over all life."

Sergeant A. J. Johnson felt his lips curl into a snarl as he growled out, "That ain't gonna happen."

With a grace born from countless battles, Johnson deftly unlimbered his ammo pouch and was ripping several fragmentation grenades free from inside before Gravemind had begun to move. Any weapons instructor would have told you that firing an M90 shotgun while on the move without having it properly secured against your shoulder, was a great way to break your arm or severely damage your ribs. That was exactly what Johnson was doing though, as he sent several buckshot rounds spraying into the center of the creature.

Movement to his left caught Johnson's attention and he was already diving to the side when a tentacle slammed into the deck floor where he had previously stood. Safety pin removed, a frag grenade sailed through the air and landed on the Flood leader. Johnson ducked behind a pillar and listened with silent satisfaction as the grenade

detonated.

Wasting no time he hoofed it across the short distance to another pillar, taking the opportunity to glance at the end of the chamber. The grenade had ripped a nice section of the Flood leader apart, but he could already tell the wound was healing.

"Your weapons are ineffective."

Johnson readied two more grenades and sent them sailing towards Gravemind, his heart racing as he watched them detonate and tear into the creature. Once again he could see the damage they inflicted was minor, and was healed just as quickly.

What the fuck does it take to kill this bastard?

Inhaling deeply, Johnson pushed off the pillar and swung around, intending to let loose with his shotgun when Gravemind slammed a tentacle across his side.

Damn it!

He was lifted off the ground and sent flying across the room before his momentum was stopped when his body slammed into one of the many pillars decorating the room. Blackness swam in front of his vision and he felt pain stab at his entire being. He fell, landing unceremoniously onto the deck, his head bouncing roughly and the shotgun fell from his grasp.

"Death is all that awaits your kind human. It is better to accept it as inevitable, than to fight against the impossible."

He broke my goddamn ribs, and my leg too! Fuck! Can't move my arm either. I'm gonna go into shock.

Johnson was beginning to lose his grip on consciousness when his bones began the agonizing process of stitching themselves back together. The pain was enough to keep him from slipping into shock as he bit down hard on his lower lip to keep from screaming.

The Flood leader must have been surprised when it heard Johnson lift himself to his knees and slowly drag himself towards his fallen weapon. He picked it up and sat back, slumping against the pillar he had crashed into earlier and checked the action, making sure it was still in working order.

"You," an almost astonished silence came. "You still live?"

"Heh," Johnson chuckled darkly as he pushed himself roughly to his feet. "I got news for you, you overgrown fly trap."

Working the action of the shotgun, Johnson chambered a round and leveled the weapon straight at the Flood leader.

"No matter how many times I'm shot, burned, or ripped apart, I'll always get back up and keep fighting. You think your immortal? Well you've just met your match. Preach all you want about your superiority, but that's not going to change the outcome here today."

Firing the shotgun, Johnson pumped the action, chambering another round instantly.

"Its time for you to get your withered ass off this ship you poor excuse for an all powerful creature. I'm going to explain it real simple for you, just why your species is going to end here."

Johnson began firing, each word leaving his mouth was accentuated with a round leaving the chamber.

"I" _Crack! _"Will" _Crack! _"Never" _Crack! _"DIE!"

-

"We are so going to die," Jan said as their Longsword fighter drifted slowly towards the Covenant fleet. Sitting next to her the Master Chief almost had the inclination to chuckle but quickly stopped himself. He'd already been far too open with this girl, something the Spartan was usually very careful of avoiding.

While Jan had been gearing up, John was given the chance to think things over. There was no question he was starting to get worn out. The only rest he had gotten in the past week was when he had been knocked unconscious when the Forerunner ship exploded and disappeared. He had fought some of his fiercest battles in the past few days, and he was now about to head out once again. Infiltrating a Covenant fleet of over 300 ships was not a mission that he could expect to come back home from, and yet he had gone and agreed to take the girl along with him.

Shaking his head slightly John brought the ship out of the slow burn and powered the engines down. They were using little more than 2 of the engines strength, which would hopefully keep them off the Covenant's radar. The Longsword fighter had been outfitted especially for this mission. There was little concern of giving the fighter any kind of armament, since fighting during their approach was the last thing they'd want to do. The maintenance crew aboard the Cairo station had worked quicker than John would have anticipated, and to compensate for the lack of weapons, they were able to work in a kind of cloaking device into the fighter.

Stolen from several Elite bodies that were aboard the _Gettysburg, _the technology had been taken apart and improved upon, to the point where the techs assured him that he'd be able to leave the ship completely obscured from view for almost five minutes. That was certainly more than enough time to find a docking bay on one of the carriers and wait for their shields to drop and sneak inside.

Boarding one of the Covenant ships was only part of his overall mission, the delay and/or destruction of the Covenant fleet was his primary concern. To carry that out, a cache of Fury tactical nukes had been stowed aboard. John had seen the simulations of the firing of them before, and knew that if he could set off the amount the Cairo techs had given him, the Covenant fleet would be out of the fight for good.

"Are you sure they can't see us?" Jan asked, staring at the Covenant fleet that stood waiting only a few thousand miles away.

"We'll be fine. Their scanners won't be able to pick us up from this distance and were running so low that our heat signatures wouldn't be detected even if we were right up next to them."

Jan looked reassured, and the Master Chief went back to the task at hand. There was heavy traffic from the fleet. Dropships and Seraph fighters moved about through the ships quickly, which meant the shields surrounding many of the ships had been brought down almost permanently.

His gaze slipped once more to the girl sitting in the copilots seat. There had been something about her, something he hadn't been able to place his finger on that had found him drawn to her. It wasn't a physical attraction, every Spartan had had their sexual drives drastically reduced during their augmentations, even though she was an attractive girl. The more he thought about it, the less he could understand it.

There was almost some kind of unfathomable loneliness to her, something he found himself sympathizing with. She put up an obviously tough front to counter that.

"Is umâ€¦is something wrong?"

John started, realizing he had been staring at him, and returned his gaze to the ships controls.

"Why did you want to come with me?" the Master Chief finally asked. Jan looked away for a moment, before staring back intently.

"I want to make a difference in this war. All I've ever done in my life is have others protect me, and I can't take it anymore. I'm tired of being looked at as some stupid girl that needs to be sheltered from everything going on."

"What about your parents?" John asked, even as images of some fragmented memories flashed through his mind. A life he had left behind long ago.

"My fathers dead," Jan said, then paused. "My mom can hardly be called an influence on my life."

John opened his mouth to reply but shut it and turned back to the controls.

"Initiating cloaking," he announced, as the fighter slipped from view.

The Master Chief and Jan sat in silence as the ship's thrusters activated, and headed directly for the Covenant fleet.

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Author's Notes: A short chapter, but necessary in my mind. Expect the next chapter to be big, as we find out about Cortana, the Arbiter, Johnson, the Master Chief, and Jan.

Thanks once again to everybody that's reviewed and read so far, I really appreciate all the kind words.

9. The End of a War Chapter 8

Disclaimer: The only thing I own around here is this story, and even then, its not very good.

****Author's Notes: ****I'm putting a little something up here just so I can explain something. I have read the Halo novels. Yes, the other Spartans are missing, which is puzzling to some people. I explained it before, but after thinking things over, I'm starting to believe that I might have made an error in judgment. Don't take this to mean the others will be showing up though. I still don't see them fitting in well in this story, but I don't know. I'll need to go do some soul searching soon to think it over.

The End of a War

Chapter 8

Guns are for Sissies, a Real Man uses Nukes

"There is a high probability that they will shoot us instead letting us dock," Cortana pointed out as their damaged dropship continued floating towards Honor Without Mercy at an agonizingly slow pace.

"If you are perhaps bored Construct, than might I suggest finding something more worthwhile to do than pointing out the different ways we might die?" the Arbiter replied as he sat slumped in the copilots seat, exhausted. It had been several hours since they had started their dreadfully long run towards the Covenant flagship, and he was beginning to feel the fatigue. His actions from the past few days were finally catching up to him.

Honor Without Mercy, which had started out as a tiny blip in space, had grown slightly in size but certainly not large enough where he was beginning to feel safe about their futures.

"I can pilot this ship fine on my own you know," Cortana said as her image appeared on a pedestal located in between the pilot and copilot seats. "If you'd like to rest then go right ahead."

The Arbiter didn't respond as his gaze slipped back out the front where the other ship waited. In truth, he really did need the rest, but something held him back. The vision he had before, even though he had written it off as a simple dream it had shaken him deeply, and he was in no hurry to relive it were he to fall asleep.

"I suppose we won't have to worry about that anymore," Cortana said. The Arbiter turned to look questioningly at her but she was staring out the front of the ship. Following her gaze the Arbiter glanced back to where the other ship waited.

It took him a moment to spot them, the squadron of Seraph fighters that detached from Honor Without Mercy and sped towards them. The wave of relief that washed over him was quickly replaced with worry as he saw them approach in a strafing formation.

"Do you think they'll shoot first and ask questions later?" Cortana asked as she continued to watch them approach. The Arbiter merely

grunted and watched as the imposing fighters streaked towards their damaged dropship.

"Have they tried hailing us?" the Arbiter asked, not removing his eyes from the ships.

"Yes, I can intercept their messages; though the ships communications were damaged in such a manner that transmitting is next to impossible."

"Then all we can do is wait," he said, almost to himself. Silence filled the cockpit as both occupants waited as the fighters grew closer, breaking formation and moving into a pincer attack.

"They are requesting we respond, to prove that we are not Flood," Cortana informed him. "I don't mean to critique but, the Flood is capable of using the voice of the infected host, so merely requesting a voice transmission isn't very safe. I believe a visual confirmation check would be more efficient."

"I will be sure to correct that the moment we get aboard _Honor Without Mercy_, Construct," the Arbiter paused, then corrected himself. "If we get aboard _Honor Without Mercy._"

"Were about to find out," Cortana said. The fighters were within range now.

Several tense moments passed as they waited for the barrage of plasma that would destroy their dropship. It came as quite a surprise when one of the lead Seraph fighters disengaged from the attack pattern and drifted close to the dropship. The front of the fighter was facing the cockpit now, and the Elite piloting the ship was gazing intently inside the dropship.

"I think you should wave," Cortana suggested. When the Arbiter turned to stare at her, she shrugged. "Unless you have a better idea."

The Arbiter raised his right arm and waved at the Seraph pilot, who seemed surprised somewhat before making a few motions with his hands.

"I believe he is offering to tow us back to the ship," the Arbiter said. As if to prove his point, the Seraph fighter drifted closer, turned around slowly, and revealed an Elite with a cable.

"At least we didn't get shot," Cortana said as their dropship was hitched together with the fighter.

"Yes," the Arbiter responded simply.

-

Huffâ€|hahâ€|huffâ€|hahâ€|

Johnson watched with hooded eyes as Gravemind struggled to pull itself back together. His breath was hitched and he had one arm wrapped around his chest, trying to stop the intense pain that was reverberating inside his chest cavity.

The fuel rod gun he had picked up from one of the downed Hunters was in his only free hand, radiation spilling off it in waves, burning his arm yet he paid it no heed. The Flood leader had somehow disabled all the access ways into the chamber, which cut off any reinforcements that were coming to his aid. He had lost track of how long their battle had been going, but he knew it felt like hours.

The regenerative properties his body possessed came at a great price. The damage he had received from the fight was great, and the healing process was excruciatingly painful.

I'm just about out of juice, but this bastard looks like he's just starting to feel it.

"You possess strength human," the Flood leader's voice filled the room. "But this battle is in vain, your death has been predetermined."

Johnson looked up and scowled as he saw that the Flood leader was back together again, no sign of the injury he had just inflicted upon it.

"Predetermined or not you dirt sucking parasite, your going down with me."

Gravemind wasted no time replying as it lashed out at Johnson, the tentacles slammed through the pillars decorating the room, collapsing them and causing the resulting debris to slam into the ground.

Taking off at full sprint, Johnson fired on the run keeping his aim steady while avoiding the Flood leader's attacks. The radioactive rounds shot forth from the fuel rod gun slammed into Gravemind, ripping through it and melting it's body in the process. A roar of outrage spilled forth from the creature and a tentacle swung sideways, intending to slam him into the far wall. Johnson let his legs give out and fell to the floor, watching as the tentacle flashed by above him.

What?

Johnson let out a startled shout when another tentacle appeared above him and wrapped around his waist, hoisting him up into the air. The air escaped his lungs as the tentacle's grip increased tenfold, nearly crushing his ribcage.

Reacting on instinct, Johnson fired the fuel rod gun, the last round the gun held. The shot was wild, and he grimaced as it impacted the ceiling above Gravemind. As the weapon began to grow hot, Johnson remembered this particular Covenant weapon had a fail-safe protocol when it ran out of ammo. Giving as best a throw as he could, Johnson tossed the weapon at Gravemind.

The Flood leader paid no attention to the weapon, deeming the final act of defiance by the human to be beyond his notice.

"Heh," Johnson smirked as the fuel rod gun sailed uninterrupted, hitting the ground and sliding to rest before the Flood leader. The radioactive weapon's fail safe activated detonating the small reactor

inside. The floor was torn asunder as the explosion sent shrapnel and concentrated radiation spilling through the air. Gravemind bellowed once more, the tentacle that had held Johnson suspended in the air was severed, dropping the sergeant several feet to crash heavily upon the ground.

Getting painfully to his knees, Johnson cast a hurried glance around him. It would be only a few moments before Gravemind was back in the fight and he needed a miracle if he was going to finish the creature off.

His eyes settled on one of the Hunter's corpses. Specifically the fuel rod gun it had been carrying. Struggling to his feet, Johnson limped his way to the fallen Hunter, wrenching the weapon from its grasp.

The first one did a number on the bastard, but not enough.

A discarded plasma grenade a few feet away caught his attention and he nearly laughed as an idea popped into his head.

Gravemind had begun to pull itself back together, it's tentacles flailing wildly, crushing more of the columns. Johnson activated the plasma grenade, slapping it onto the fuel rod gun fusing the two weapons together. Gritting his teeth against the pain the movement brought, he reached back and threw the improvised weapon at the Flood leader. His eyes never left the device as it sailed across the chamber.

Despite trying to pull itself together, Gravemind was still capable of batting the improvised weapon up above itself. Johnson cursed loudly and was turning to find another weapon when the grenade detonated.

The grenade did what Johnson had expected it to do, detonating the small fusion reactor in the weapon without having to deplete it's ammunition. What followed he had not anticipated.

Johnson's earlier wild shot had damaged the ceiling above Gravemind, and the damage Gravemind itself had inflicted from destroying the many columns positioned around the chamber had weakened the structural integrity of the room. While the Flood leader had knocked the weapon far enough away from itself where it would not do much harm, it was close enough to the ceiling to do sufficient damage.

Neither Johnson nor the Flood leader were prepared when the ceremonial chamber began to collapse.

Shit! I gotta get out of here.

He had taken only a few steps when something wrapped around his leg and dragged him to the floor. Glancing back Johnson saw that it was one of Gravemind's tentacles that had a hold of him.

"This will become both our graves human."

Johnson had only enough time to scream his frustration before the chamber collapsed in on itself.

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"Keep your eyes on the access ways," John ordered as he scoured the docking bay, looking for some kind of control panel. He had to find something that would give him an idea of where they would find the ship's engines. Without Cortana inside his suit he doubted it would be as simple as punching a few buttons on one of the Covenant's access panels.

Jan was standing firm, keeping her eyes glued to the many different doors that led into the cruisers docking station. To her credit, she wasn't showing many of the regular signs of a soldier heading into combat for the first time, but John could tell most of this bravado was for show. Whether it was for him or her own personal relief, he couldn't tell.

The cloaking device the techs aboard Cairo station had fastened to their Longsword fighter had saved their lives, as it had allowed them to move into the docking bay unnoticed. That is, until the Spartan had emerged from the cloaked ship and began shooting up the place. Since the split in the Covenant, it seemed that the normal role of guards had been shifted from the Grunts and handed over to the Jackals, as they were all that filled the bay aside from the engineers.

John was certain their presence had already been announced over the Covenant tactical network, but he was counting on the general state of disorder among the fleet that they would be given a few moments of respite. At least enough time to find out where they needed to go to plant the Fury nuke and get the hell off the ship.

"Uh Chief, I think we've got company," Jan's voice rang out. John quickly turned and saw her pointing out across the bay, where a squad of Brutes had entered. It took them only a few moments to locate the two humans.

John was about to order Jan to find some cover when she dumped the pack of Fury tactical nukes to the compartment floor and dropped to a prone position. The BR55 Rifle in her hands began firing short three-round bursts at the Brutes. John watched, captivated, as the teenage girl seemed to follow the normal operating protocol for firing the weapon. She was even taking in a full breath before releasing it halfway before firing, ensuring a steady and calm stream of fire.

Shaking himself from his stupor, John swung his rifle off his shoulder into his hands and began firing, though he fired from a standing position. Their combined rate of fire forced the brutes on the opposite end of the bay to seek cover, lest they be torn apart.

"Grab the nukes and head out those doors!" John shouted. Jan glanced briefly at the Spartan before nodding. She slung her rifle, picked up the discarded bag, and dashed to the access way he had pointed out. Once she was safely through the doors, John tossed a fragmentation grenade at the hidden Brutes and followed after Jan.

"Where to now?" Jan asked from behind him. John started and turned around; surprised she had managed to sneak up behind him.

"We've gotta find the engine room for now," John said, frowning slightly as several plasma shots hit the door from the other side. Turning back, he powered down the shields around his right fist and slammed it into the control panel next to the door, short-circuiting it.

Wordlessly he continued down the corridor, Jan close behind. Their moment of respite was over now, and they were going to have Covenant breathing down their necks. Completion of his mission was his primary concern, but as he heard Jan shift the bag of tactical nukes on her shoulder he knew that there was something else he would be fighting for.

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"How long has it been since you left the chamber?" the Arbiter asked the collection of Elites. He stood before the sealed doors that led into the ceremonial chamber and was fingering the energy sword that was attached to his waist.

"Several hours, Arbiter. The human requested we go retrieve reinforcements, but the moment we stepped from the chamber the doors sealed. Communication with the human has not been possible."

Frowning slightly, the Arbiter turned away from the other Elites and looked at the sealed door. The chamber they led into was where the Prophet of Mercy had delivered sermons and as such, the entries were reinforced. If there was time they could eventually break into the chamber, but the Arbiter was loath to let the human be torn apart by the parasite leader.

"Construct are you into the ship yet?" he asked over the ship's com.

"I'm in," Cortana's voice filled the room. "Give me a moment and I'll get the door open. Be warned though, I reviewed the ship's schematics and it seems there were several explosions of sufficient size to register."

As if on cue, the doors slid open allowing the group of Elites access to the chamber. The Arbiter stepped in first, and was taken aback by what he saw.

The far section of the chamber was covered in debris. The above deck had collapsed through the ceiling, and that appeared to have caused the chamber floor to cave in on the lower deck. There was no sign of life; the only occupant in the chamber was the twisted metal that had been destroyed.

"Is there any sign of life, Construct?" the Arbiter asked as he took a few cautionary steps forward.

"Scanning," Cortana said. "I've detected one signal, though there is still interference from the Flood leader, and I cannot determine if the subject is still alive."

The Arbiter turned and looked at the other Elites.

"Start digging through the debris, there may be a survivor."

As the Elites began to lift and pull away much of the collapsed ceiling, the Arbiter walked further on through the chamber, towards the section where the deck had collapsed. He stood upon the edge of the broken deck and peered below.

No sign of the parasite. Should I be relieved or worried?

The Arbiter jumped down to the below deck, and pulled the energy blade from his side, activating it. The silence was deafening as he took several steps towards the collapsed section.

"You sure took your time."

The voice had come from behind him, and the Arbiter spun around swiftly, fully intending to dismember the speaker. His arm was stayed however, when he identified Sergeant Johnson, who was slumped against some debris. He lowered the blade and stepped towards the human.

"Where is the parasite leader?" he asked. Johnson coughed heavily, his hand coming away from his mouth covered in blood.

"Dead," he ground out. "The bastard pulled me down through the deck with him when the ceiling came down."

"You are certain?"

Another coughing fit hit the sergeant, and the Arbiter was worried for a moment that he might pass out.

"I've been sitting here for the past hour watching, waiting for the sonofabitch to poke his raggedy ass out of that pile. He hasn't yet, so I'm starting to think he just might be dead this time."

The Arbiter looked over his shoulder to the pile of debris. The yellow liquid that was so prominent from the parasite was layered on the floor, lending credence to the human's observation.

"We will burn the remains just to be sure," the Arbiter said. "For now though, we should inform the others. Your Construct was curious over your condition, as was the commander."

"The Major's dead," Johnson said suddenly, and the Arbiter felt himself wince. "By the time we arrived his team had already been taken down by that thing, we couldn't do a thing."

"I understand," the Arbiter said, as he gave a silent prayer for his comrade. "If you are able, then I believe we should leave now."

Johnson laughed roughly, surprising the Arbiter.

"I think your going to have to get me some help," the human soldier said. He used his left arm to indicate the area where his right arm should have been.

The Arbiter cast his gaze downward, and saw the sergeant's dismembered limb lying close by.

How can this human still be conscious? Let alone speak? The pain must be unbearable.

"We will get you some assistance then huâ€¦!" the Arbiter stopped himself before he said 'human'. "Sergeant."

With care, the Arbiter retrieved Johnson's right arm, and walked over to help the Sergeant to his feet.

"I had thought that I would need to help you fight the parasite leader," the Arbiter admitted as they climbed the debris. He nearly felt the smirk that spread across Johnson's face.

"So sorry, the next time we find one I'll let you take the first stab at it."

The Arbiter felt the urge to smile, for the first time in a long while.

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Author's Notes: A new chapter, ready and delivered for your viewing pleasure. I hope everyone that had questions read my initial A/N at the top.

10. The End of a War Chapter 9

The End of a War

Chapter 9

Old Friends, New Friends, and a Little Something to get you Guys off my Back

These damn security measures get more annoying every time I have to come back here.

Colonel Ackerson waited impatiently as his handprint was scanned, acknowledging that it was actually him trying to enter the War Room in Section III's underground network of bunkers. While traversing several kilometers below the Earth's surface was necessary to reach the heart of the ONI compound, he still found it aggravating each instance it was necessary, and since the Covenant appearance in the system, he had almost been living there.

"You may proceed sir," the impeccably uniformed Marine announced once the verification was complete. Grumbling to himself Ackerson walked through the doors and down the corridor that would lead him to his destination.

The particular meeting he was heading to had been called by Fleet Admiral Cortez, and Ackerson had it on good intel that it had something to do with the backing off of the Covenant fleet. The emergence of the unidentified ship in the middle of the battle had thrown ONI for a loop, struggling desperately to gain whatever information there was on the object. Admiral Hood, who was still on the Cairo Station, had alerted command that the ship was of Forerunner origin. While information on the Forerunners had been extremely limited at the start of the Covenant War, ever since Dr.

Halsey's freaks and her A.I had returned they soon had more information than they could analyze.

The Colonel was still fuming about the survival of the remaining Spartans, especially since he had finally gotten some more funding for his Special Warfare project when it had been announced earlier that all of them had perished along with the fall of Reach. Their return had meant he was put on the backburner once again, while the Spartans basked in the limelight.

"Colonel Ackerson, glad you could make it."

The other members had already arrived, and Ackerson knew a thinly veiled reproach lay behind that greeting, but he would be damned if he'd let them think he detected it.

"When the Admiral beckons, I shall come," he responded with fake humility. Struggling vainly to keep the frown from his face, Ackerson found his seat and waited for the meeting to start.

Admiral Cortez spoke first from his seat at the head of the room.

"At precisely 1348 hours, the previously unidentifiable Forerunner ship entered the system from Slip Space. Admiral Hood received a transmission over a private com from Spartan -117. The ship was controlled by the Covenant, and the Master Chief intended to retake it."

There were a series of murmurs from around the table, and Admiral Cortez waited until they had died down before continuing.

"Admiral Hood was able to get Spartan -117 to give him a short briefing on what transpired after In Amber Clad followed the Covenant flagship into Slip Space. After exiting Slip Space, the crew aboard the frigate found themselves in another system entirely, where another Halo was discovered."

There were no murmurs this time around, and Colonel Ackerson attributed that to the majority of them being too stupefied to speak.

"Spartan -117 landed on the ring, and followed one of the Covenant Hierarchs; the Prophet of Regret was its name. He assassinated the Prophet and then was captured byâ€" the Admiral paused slightly, as if struggling to comprehend what he was about to say. "By some kind of creature that was apparently the leader of the Flood. Shortly thereafter the Master Chief was transported aboard a Covenant city, one that had entered the system before the death of the Prophet of Regret."

Colonel Ackerson sat forward in his chair and spoke. "So the Spartan was captured by the leader of the Flood, yet somehow survived? Did he kill it?"

"It would seem that he was instead sent to the Covenant city on a mission from the Flood leader," Admiral Cortez explained, then quickly continued. "The Covenant were intending to activate Halo, it seems that they believe it has some kind of religious significance. I would presume that the Flood leader did not wish for such an event to

occur, and sent the Master Chief to stop the Covenant."

"At this time, Commander Keyes and the troops under her command attempted to retrieve the index that is necessary in activating the installation, but they were captured by the Covenant. It is not known at this time whether they are still alive. Spartan -117 discovered that the Prophet of Truth, was planning on taking the Forerunner ship and bringing it to Earth, and boarded the ship to stop him. Cortana was left behind in case the Halo installation was somehow activated. If that occurred, she would destroy both the Covenant city and Halo."

The room was silent, as the occupants mulled over that bit of information. Colonel Ackerson had been aware of this before heading to the meeting. One of his agents aboard Cairo station had furnished him with the news earlier.

Admiral Cortez cleared his throat to get the room's attention once more.

"Spartan -117 somehow caused an explosion of sufficient force aboard the Forerunner ship to disrupt communications from all stations for a period of five minutes. He was subsequently thrown off the ship before it disappeared, most likely into Slip Space. Admiral Hood has informed me that once the ship disappeared, the Covenant fleet backed off, and he has sent the Master Chief to finish them off."

Colonel Ackerson nearly felt a smile light up his face with that bit of news. By the last reports, there was still a large number of the Covenant fleet still functional. Sending one Spartan after them was a suicide mission.

"I received some good news just before arriving here," Admiral Cortez announced, directing attention once more to himself. "Spartans -104-058, and -043 have all returned from surgery. Their status is critical still, but no longer life-threatening."

Goddamnit! Why can't those bastards just die? First they survive the glassing of Reach, then they survive being onboard the Athens and the Malta when the Covenant blew them up.

"Unfortunately it will be quite some time before they'll be up and walking, let alone ready for battle," Admiral Cortez continued, turning towards Ackerson. "I guess that means we'll be needing to get a good look at your weapons program, Colonel."

Shaking himself from his angry thoughts, Ackerson plastered an impassive look onto his face.

"Yes sir, the newly designed MAC guns are ready for deployment. The plasma upgrades that we improved upon from the Covenant ships are more than we could have hoped for," Ackerson said, trying his best to keep the boastfulness from his voice.

"That's good to hear," Cortez acknowledged. "Were the improvements Cortana delivered implemented as well? General Strauss was quite interested in her description of their performance against the Covenant ships."

"Of course sir, I made sure they were added personally," Colonel

Ackerson ground out through a clenched jaw. He kept his temper in check however; it would not do to lose control here.

With the three other Spartans out of commission for a while, and Spartan -117 heading towards certain death against the Covenant fleet, he would finally be recognized along with his achievements.

Things were finally starting to go his way.

* * *

>"Where the hell are we?" Jan asked, searching her ammo belt for another magazine. The fighting had been intense, and she was running desperately low on ammunition. <p>"This appears to be some kind of communications relay station," the Master Chief said, slinging his rifle and walking to an access panel. Jan watched as he began accessing the system.<p>

The Covenant aboard the ship had been tenacious in trying to overwhelm them. The disarray among the Covenant fleet had been the only factor in keeping them alive.

Well, that and him, Jan thought as she stared at the Master Chief. _He's like a God during battle. Nothing phases him; he keeps his cool even when we're a few seconds away from having a volley of plasma vaporize us._

Jan had been under the impression that while the Spartans were excellent soldiers, they were certainly not the behemoths that ONI public relations liked to describe them. Seeing the Master Chief in battle however, had quickly destroyed that thought. That the Spartans had somehow nearly been completely wiped out seemed unfathomable to her.

"It looks like the Covenant has finally figured out were aboard," the Spartan announced from the communications station. Jan moved to stand beside him as he gazed intently at the controls.

"You can understand their language?" she inquired, unconsciously stepping closer as she peered at the doors behind them. The last group of Drones they had encountered had been torn apart rather viciously by the Spartan, and she suspected the noise had attracted more attention. The Master Chief turned slightly and tapped his helmet.

"Translation software," he said. "The commander of the ship just sent out a broadcast to the whole fleet saying that their under attack. We've got a couple of minutes before the other cruisers send more troops and we get overrun."

Jan fought the tingle of fear that lanced down her spine and gestured to the other doors that would take them further into the ship.

"We'd better get a move on then. If we can find the engines and plant the nukes were not going to have much time to get out of here before the whole fleet is on top of us."

The Spartan shook his head, surprising her.

"The two lead ships, their communicating a series of coordinates, I think it might lead us to where the Forerunner ship disappeared to."

Jan cast a worried glance at the Master Chief as she waved a hand in front of his face.

"Um, hello? That information won't do us much good if we're swarmed by the Covenant and killed. Let's just plant the nukes and get the hell off this ship."

"Not yet, just a few moments longer," the Spartan said intently. Jan huffed slightly and turned in the other direction, folding her arms and glaring at the set of doors that would lead them out of the communications station.

Several moments of tense silence passed, with Jan growing more worried by the second. She cast a worried glance over her shoulder to see the Master Chief in the same position, bent over the controls gazing through them as he listened to Covenant transmissions.

"Damn," the Spartan said suddenly, startling Jan. He looked towards her quickly. "We've got to move, now."

"What's wrong?" Jan asked, the urgency in the Master Chief's voice sending alarm bells ringing in her head.

"There was a Slip Space rupture detected just now; the ship's identification code signifies it as one that was aboard the Covenant city back at the other Halo installation. That means it's either full of Elites looking to kill some Brutes, or even worse, it's filled with Flood."

"Flood?" Jan questioned, confused. She nearly took a step back as the Master Chief reached towards her and pulled the pack of Fury tactical nukes off her shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Priming the detonators," the Spartan responded simply. "There's no time to find the generators now. We have to leave right away."

Jan watched wordlessly as the Master Chief activated all of the nukes and set their timers. Once finished he quickly got to his feet and moved towards the doors leading out of the room.

"How much time do we have?" she asked, hurrying to catch up with him. He glanced back at her briefly.

"Five minutes."

Jan felt her adrenalin spark and she started to sprint as the Spartan slowly increased his speed. She could tell the Spartan was holding back for her sake, and she was quite grateful, for despite her own abilities, she was nowhere near the top speed of him.

The Master Chief led them down a twisting series of corridors, his course seemingly predetermined, but Jan found herself worrying that he was choosing pathways at random. Her legs burned as she mentally counted down the timer.

4:23

Jan nearly shrieked when the Master Chief reached over suddenly and snaked an arm around her waste. Without preamble, she was unceremoniously scooped up and thrown over his shoulder. She mentally noted as the Spartan speeded up that while this was normally the thing she would get upset about, there were other things to think about for now.

3:49

"There!" the Master Chief shouted. Jan craned her neck and saw they were heading towards a small set of doors. They parted as the two approached and Jan noticed they were inside of an escape pod. She was about to enquire who was to pilot when the Spartan dumped her in one of the seats and told her to strap herself in.

"Do you think we'll make it?" Jan asked as the Master Chief climbed into the pilot's seat. He punched a series of emblems on the holo-panel and the escape pod rumbled to life.

"Brace yourself," the Spartan ordered, moments before the pod blew away from the Covenant cruiser. The action was less jarring than they had anticipated.

1:36

Jan clenched her eyes shut, continuing her mental countdown. The Fury nukes had a megaton yield, and the chances of putting enough distance between them and the cruiser were far too slim for her to consider. She tried to push those thoughts aside, letting an old memory of her father surface.

Oh God, please don't let me die here.

Without her knowledge, tears began streaming from her clenched eyes. Silent sobs shook her body, catching the attention of the Spartan piloting the craft. His body twisted momentarily, letting his eyes fall on the girl.

0:00

* * *

>Honor Without Mercy exited Slip Space at Cortana's coordinates, which brought them to the edge of the Sol System. She would have brought the ship closer to Earth, but she wasn't willing to take the chance of one of the MAC guns putting a shot through their hull. When the last bit of disorientation passed from slipping into normal space, Cortana immediately sent several probes to check on the action around Earth.

Before the probes had cleared the ship, they were already picking up signals. Cortana opened up a visual with the probes and was nearly stupefied by what she saw.

An entire Covenant fleet were in the same coordinates that Cortana had just jumped.

"What's our status Cortana?" Commander Keyes asked the A.I.

"We've got trouble," she responded. "The Covenant fleet isn't attacking Earth; they're clustered together point three parsecs from our location."

"Engage them," the Arbiter ordered from the bridge. "Their formation is broken and clumped together. We will raze the Brute fleet."

"Negate that order Cortana," Keyes demanded quickly, turning to the Elite. "As much of an advantage as we have, they'll cut us down before we can eliminate all those cruisers."

Before the two commanders could continue their argument, Cortana cut in.

"We've got a target moving towards the ship; it appears to be an escape pod."

"Can you tell who's on board?" Keyes asked. Cortana scanned the Covenant escape pod, and felt an emotion near elation fill her core.

"I've detected a UNSC signal aboard the escape pod, it's the Master Chief."

"Move to intercept the escape pod Cortana," Keyes ordered. "The Chief won't think to try and come aboard on his own. He'll figure were probably reinforcements for the other Covenant."

Cortana started the ship towards the small escape pod just as the Arbiter spoke.

"What was the Demon doing aboard the other ships?"

Keyes had started to reply when Cortana detected a massive influx in energy. The ship's sensors flared as an explosion erupted from the center of the Covenant fleet. Honor Without Mercy rocked heavily from the resulting debris and shock field.

"Cortana, report."

"That explosion came from inside one of the Covenant cruisers. Judging from the size of the explosion, I'd say the Master Chief must have brought a nuclear device aboard the Covenant ship."

As she was reporting to Keyes, Cortana was also checking the status of the escape pod. It had taken a heavy hit, but from what the probes could tell, her it looked like the craft was still intact. The explosion had destroyed and damaged numerous ships in the Covenant fleet. Several had survived though, and were limping around in a daze. She would deal with them in a moment; her first concern was getting the Master Chief's pod aboard their ship.

* * *

>John groaned audibly, bringing a gloved hand up to his face. When the force of the Fury warhead detonation had reached their small escape pod, the force of the impact had slammed the Master Chief into the side of the craft. Spots swan in front of his eyes as he tried to

reorient himself. When his hand contacted his bare skin, the Spartan frowned in confusion. <p>With his vision cleared, John stared out the front cockpit, and a cold lump formed in his stomach. They were in a docking bay, and the design was Covenant.<p>

His helmet lay below his feet, but the Master Chief ignored it as he climbed out of the cockpit and walked to where Jan hung limply in her seat. He approached her cautiously; his face creased with worry as he brought a hand gently to the girl's shoulder and shook her.

When a moan of discomfort left Jan, the Master Chief felt a smile tug at his lips. He unfastened the clasps keeping her in place and let her slump forward against him.

"Can you stand?" John asked her softly. Another groan escaped Jan as she pushed against him slightly.

"Am I dead?"

The Master Chief couldn't stop the smile from gracing his face this time.

"It doesn't look like it, but we're not out of the woods yet," he said, glancing out the front of the pod. He wrapped one arm around Jan's waist and pulled the M6C handgun from her holster. "I need you to stay here Jan, the Covenant picked us up and once they check this pod they're going to realize they made a mistake."

Leaning down John set the girl lightly upon the ground. As he pulled back up Jan clung weakly to the arm that had been supporting her.

"Areâ€|are you going to leave me?"

Her voice was brittle, as if the slightest touch would break it. John inhaled deeply and knelt down to see her face.

"No, I won't leave," his voice was soft. "I have to go for a bit though, but I'll be back. I promise."

Jan smiled weakly at the Spartan before unconsciousness overwhelmed her and she slumped back against the escape pod wall. John reached back to pick up his rifle just as the hatch for the escape pod swung outwards.

The handgun he had taken from Jan was trained on the door in an instant, and he was covering Jan as a figure stepped into view. His instincts screamed at him to fire but he held back, keeping his finger in the trigger guard.

"Lower the gun Chief, it's alright."

The feminine note to the voice puzzled him until the figure moved closer. It was Commander Keyes.

"Commander," the Master Chief said, so surprised he forgot to snap a salute to the officer.

"There's a lot we've got to talk about Master Chief, one of which is the fact we came on this ship with the assistance of the Elites,

Hunters, and Grunts. The Arbiter instructed them that you are not to be harmed, but don't expect much hospitality on their part. Grab your gear and let's head for the bridge."

The Master Chief, in a daze, got to his feet and retrieved his helmet, checking it over for any severe damage. The clamps in place that sealed it with his chest piece had snapped, which had allowed the helmet to fall off. He stowed that information away and placed it back onto his head then turned back, and bent down to lift Jan into his arms. Keyes raised a delicate eyebrow at him but didn't comment as she led him out of the pod and down into the bay.

"Whatever you did to blow up the Covenant fleet was enough to knock out almost eighty-percent of their ships. We're mopping up the rest right now."

"Commander, if you survived than is Cor-" John was cut off as a familiar voice filtered through the ship's com.

"I leave you alone for only one day and your already out picking up girls," Cortana tsk'd, before switching over to a personal channel inside the Master Chief's suit. "Its nice to see you didn't heroically sacrifice yourself trying to stop Truth."

"Its nice to see you didn't go down in a blaze of glory to stop Halo from firing," John shot back. Cortana's voice was a much welcome intrusion inside his suit. He had missed her presence ever since he had parted with her the previous day.

"Let me guess, you blew up the Forerunner ship, then after that taste of action you just had to set off a couple nukes to take out an entire Covenant fleet," Cortana said grandly. "Am I close?"

"You know me and my love for high explosives," John remarked, a smile working its way onto his face again. "How much do you weigh the disbanded Covenant member's loyalty?" he asked, switching to a more serious tone.

"They're loyal, especially the one called the Arbiter, the one you met when we had a run-in with Gravemind," Cortana explained. "Johnson was nearly killed several times risking his neck to kill Gravemind a few hours ago, and that really struck a cord with the Elites and the Hunters. I suspect the Grunts are going to go along simply because were not trustworthy enough to use them as cannon fodder like the Covenant did."

"Johnson killed Gravemind?" the Master Chief asked, his mind replaying the encounter he had with the Flood leader.

"It would appear so, but I'm not entirely convinced. Johnson did however manage to stay alive for nearly three hours fighting the creature, though without the regenerative abilities he inherited from the Flood, I doubt he would have survived. As it is, his right arm was severed and he's in surgery as we speak."

The Master Chief grunted his acknowledgement. He had always respected Johnson as a skilled soldier, but if the account Cortana had just told him was true, than he had done something even he himself might not have accomplished.

"So, who's the girl, and please don't tell me she's your little something on the side," Cortana requested.

"She," the Spartan paused to look down at her. "I don't really know."

Cortana paused a few seconds before replying.

"Alright, well I'm guessing that since she's unconscious she took some damage during your daring escape. Have Keyes take you to the medical bay and then get up to the bridge, we've got a problem."

"What's wrong?" John asked, concern touching his voice.

"I alerted Admiral Hood that we're aboard the ship, and it's friendly. He responded that were to head back to Earth ASAP, Section III wants a debriefing right away, and I'm guessing their going to want an explanation about our new friends."

That's right, the Master Chief thought, as he looked at several Elites clustered together down the corridor. _How the hell are we going to explain this?_

* * *

>Author's Notes: Hmm, I rather liked this chapter, not sure why. Anyways, thanks for all the kind words everyone, you really know how to give me inspiration to get these chapters out the gates as soon as possible. Also, I want to plug a new Fable story that I read. It's called Fable: Prophecy and it just appeared the other day. Compared to the other stories on there its really good, so if you've been looking for a good piece of Fable fanfiction check it out, it looks quite promising.<p>P.S. - To reiterate, there isn't any romance in this story, so please don't go asking if something is brewing between Jan and the Master Chief.<p>

11. The End of a War Chapter 10

The End of a War

Chapter 10

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Janissary James felt her dreams slip away and slowly be replaced with cold harsh reality. She whimpered as a resonating pounding sounded off in her skull. Trying her best to remain perfectly still she dimly noted that she was lying on something.

Oh God, it feels like I've been listening to one of Jersey's crappy 'Flip' albums. Why the hell did I refuse to take the helmet back on Cairo? I'll be lucky if I don't have a cracked skull.

After a few moments she realized she still had her eyes clenched shut, and experimentally opened them a fraction of the way. A ceiling filled her vision, along with strange lighting. It was a far different design than she remembered seeing back on Cairo station, in fact it looked almost alien.

_Now why the hell does that thought make me on edge? _she groaned mentally. _Moreover, why am I getting the feeling that something's wrong?_

A memory flashed through her mind, one of her clutching weakly to the Master Chief's arm and begging him not to leave her. Jan flushed slightly, wondering how she would explain that to the Spartan later.

Her musings were cut short however when a chattering noise off to the side caught her attention. Craning her neck slowly to the right, Jan felt her breath get hitched in her throat.

"You awake now?" the small Grunt asked, standing no more than six inches from her. It watched, perplexed, as the human girl looked shocked and then angry. Had the creature anymore time to consider why the girl might have been angry, it most likely would have moved out of the way when Jan leapt from the medical compartment and delivered a strong roundhouse kick. The Grunt wailed as it skidded across the medical bay, knocking over tables and other devices before it was stopped by the far wall.

Jan had picked up a small device that looked as if it were some kind of scalpel, and was advancing on the Grunt even before it had time to scramble to it's feet.

"Wait! Me not your enemy!"

"Shut it!" Jan shouted. "Where's the Master Chief? What did you freaks do to him?"

She'd gotten within a few feet of the Grunt when a new voice sounded in the chamber.

"Put the knife down girl, the only danger that little guy poses is to your shins, and I've never seen them capable of kicking before."

The decidedly human touch to the voice made Jan pause, turning slightly to gaze at another medical table. A large muscular Marine was sprawled out on it, and Jan recognized him immediately. He had been at the televised awards ceremony with the Master Chief on Cairo station.

"You mind telling me what you're doing here?" the Marine asked, his voice was gruff and Jan could tell an order when she heard one. "Last time I checked the only humans on this ship were me and the Commander, so unless you sprouted wings and flew here, than there's gotta be an explanation."

"My names Jan, Janissary James," she said, sputtering slightly under the Marines intense gaze. "I'm not too sure how I got here, the Master Chief said the Covenant picked up our escape pod, but the next thing I know I'm lying on an operating bed waiting for some Grunt to start dissecting me."

The Marine grunted, even as a smirk worked its way onto his face.

"You were with the Chief?" Jan nodded, and the Marine continued, "So

I presume you're a Marine as well, though you look a little young."

"I'm not a Marine," Jan replied. "And I'm seventeen by the way."

"Huh, too young to join the Corps," the Marine paused. "A Navy tech?"

Jan shook her head, "I'm not in the military buddy, and now that I've answered some of your questions could you maybe answer one of mine. Like why are you on a Covenant ship and why have we not been killed yet?"

The Marine laughed even as he shifted uncomfortably, and Jan noticed him wince when he moved his right side.

"I suppose the Master Chief didn't tell you, but things are strange in the Covenant now. The Elites, Hunters, and Grunts have been kicked out, meaning we've got a temporary alliance in the works here. I also don't think kicking that little guy was very nice given the circumstances."

Jan found herself somewhat embarrassed and turned around to apologize to the Grunt, only to see it had passed out.

"You gave it quite a scare with that knife," the Marine commented. "I don't think even a normal Marine wouldn't have pissed himself seeing you come at them like that. Where'd you learn those moves?"

"I've had a few good teachers in my time," Jan grinned. She was about to elaborate when the Marine's face suddenly contorted with agony and he fell back against the table, swearing roughly. Before Jan could rush to his side, an alarm sounded and a pair of side doors slid open, revealing a squad of unarmed Grunts, who began a series of checks on the control systems in front of the Marine. A long mechanical arm appeared from underneath the table and something akin to a syringe was produced. It administered a shot to the Marine, who immediately lost consciousness.

A lone Grunt broke away from the action surrounding the Marine and trotted over to Jan.

"Human Commander say when girl wake for her to see her. She on bridge, you want me to take?" the creature asked in broken English. Jan shook her head, mentally noting that when not in combat the Grunts could look quite cute.

"I'm sure I can find it on my own," she replied, shooting one last look at the Marine before exiting the medical bay. Without any real knowledge of where she was going, Jan hung a right and walked down a long corridor, populated with several groups of Grunts and Elites. As she approached they cleared a way for her, even the Elites, who watched her with intense eyes. The Marine fatigues she wore seemed to make her stand out more than she normally would, which made her slightly uneasy.

The corridor soon emptied into a large network of crossways, leading off in several different directions. Jan stopped and glanced around, wondering if perhaps declining the Grunt's offer had been a wise

choice. The ships architecture was confusing to say the least, and her experience navigating ships was somewhere on the low-end of the spectrum.

As she was about to turn back and ask one of the Elites she saw earlier where the bridge was, a resounding crash echoed down from one of the corridors. Curiosity got the better of her and she turned down the corridor, approaching the open doors that led into an enormous chamber. Before she could enter, a pair of voices caught her attention.

"-lieve that the Flood leader was aboard this vessel ever since the parasite arrived on High Charity. It had accessed the ships schematics and your Construct has informed me that it learned of the location of your home world, as well as ours."

The Master Chief and an Elite were standing near the door of the chamber, facing the other end. Several Hunters were clearing away rubble that looked like it came from the upper deck. The Spartan and the Elite weren't facing each other, but Jan could see that both soldiers looked tense.

"I checked in on Sergeant Johnson before speaking with Cortana," the Chief said, his voice belaying an underlying tone of apprehension. "Is there any other way we can confirm he killed Gravemind?"

The Elite in the strange armor shook his head. "_Honor Without Mercy'_s security systems were somehow bypassed by the parasite, any recordings we may have been able to analyze were destroyed. Regardless of whether or not the parasite survived, it is no longer aboard this ship."

Jan inched closer to the door, and saw that the Hunters were now using their fuel rod guns and firing constant streams of concentrated radiation down into the collapsed deck. As the Hunters continued their work, an uneasy silence descended on the pair of soldiers.

"Is the Prophet of Truth dead?' the Elite suddenly asked. Jan noticed the Master Chief pause slightly before responding.

"No, I destroyed the Forerunner artifact he carried with him and it triggered an explosion. I'm not sure what happened but I was thrown off the ship and before it could be destroyed, it entered Slip Space. I intercepted several transmissions from the Covenant fleet before it was destroyed, one of which was a series of coordinates. Once were back on Earth, we'll be able to analyze them closely and determine exactly where they lead."

Something close to a sigh was emitted by the Elite, and Jan saw his shoulders bunch up.

"I do not wish for those aboard this ship to be killed once we land on your planet Demon," the Elite said. The Master Chief finally turned and looked at him.

"Cortana has informed the defenses that we're not under Covenant control, they won't open fire when we approach," the Spartan explained, somewhat confused. The Elite gave the Master Chief a hard glare in response.

"We are warriors Demon," the Elite snarled. "Do not pretend you are unaware of how your people view us. I have witnessed the extermination and cleansing of many planets your kind inhabited. Millions of humans wiped out as we burn their bodies into ash. What about you Demon, we murdered the other members of your unit on Reach."

The Spartan had turned fully to regard the Elite, and Jan saw his right hand flex slightly. The motion didn't fail to catch the Elite's notice either.

"Now do you see?" he questioned angrily. "If a soldier of your discipline can still despise us, how will your commanders feel? The people who have lost their families? "

"Are you done?" the Spartan asked, coldly. "Mankind doesn't kill those that don't pose a threat to us. You've got us confused with your hierarchs."

The Elite laughed unkindly. "Hatred does not disappear simply because the threat is no longer there Demon. You will see this soon enough."

Before the Spartan could respond the Elite walked off, towards the Hunters. Jan hung back, wondering if announcing her presence would be a good idea.

"Hey Chie-" she stopped herself from finishing her greeting when the Spartan suddenly slammed a fist into a nearby metal column. His fist punched through the outer layer and was buried up to his wrist, but the Spartan didn't notice. The Master Chief was staring at the deck, giving no sign of having heard her.

"Excuse me."

Jan jumped when a hand fell softly on her shoulder, and spun around sharply. Instead of some kind of hideous Covenant beast behind her, a human female was there, smiling softly at her.

"Did I startle you?" the woman asked. Jan shook her head, even as she tried mentally to get her heart to stop hammering in her chest.

"No, I'm just not used to seeing so manyâ€¦" Jan paused, "non-humans."

The woman laughed softly and stuck out her hand.

"Miranda Keyes," she said by way of introduction. Jan grasped the extended hand.

"Janissary James."

The two smiled at each other for a moment before Miranda continued.

"Would you like to take a walk with me Ms. James?"

"Uh, sure," Jan said. Miranda led her away from the chamber and back into the crossways she had previously walked through. They walked in silence as they passed a cluster of Elites and a pair of

Hunters.

"There's a few things I need to ask you Jan," Miranda said once they were alone in the corridor. "The Master Chief was somewhat vague on the details of how you wound up fighting with him on the Covenant fleet."

Before Jan could respond, the older woman held up a hand to silence her as they continued their slow pace.

"I was wondering just what your relationship is with Spartan -117," Miranda explained. "Despite your Marine fatigues I'm guessing from your lack of identification that your not a soldier. I had Cortana pull up the UNSC rosters and it says you applied for service not even a month ago, and was consequentially turned down because you were under the required age. So Janissary James, just who are you?"

Jan felt her hands twine together and twist uneasily. Skipping around the truth would only get her in trouble with this woman.

"Okay, I'll tell you everything, but I think we need to find some place to sit down, this could take awhile."

* * *

>Darkness consumed the bridge. The explosion that rocked the ship previously had disrupted all controls and power. As consciousness slowly returned to the crew they began to realize that something was wrong.<p><p>

The Prophet of Truth felt the room slowly hum to life, at the same moment he regained control over his body.

"Report!" the Prophet barked out to the Brutes that were struggling to activate the ships controls.

"Your Holiness, it appears we have entered Slip Space," the Brute Commander announced. The Prophet of Truth fought the urge to shout his displeasure. The Brutes needed to continue to see him as an unshakable.

"Bring the ship our of Slip Space, Commander, and send a squad of Brutes to find the Demon. Do what you wish with the body, I want his head."

Where is the Holy Light? Has the Demon destroyed it as well?

The Forerunner crystal wasn't present in the room, and neither was the Demon himself.

The vermin must have retreated.

"Your Holiness, this unworthy one must report that we cannot access the ship's controls."

Truth stared down at the Brute.

"Then regain control, Commander. I will not accept any failure on your part."

As the Brute returned to his station, the Prophet of Truth turned to internal musings.

The Demon shall pay for his transgression!

* * *

>There is still strength in this world. From where did they regain their prowess? Much is to be answered, and many questions remain, my kind must not be ended here. There is time, and the foolishness of mortals will bring me opportunity.

A long tentacle gripped the small orb-like monitor from the depths of the darkness.

"What do you see?" the creature asked.

"A rupture in the power grid, I detect several frigate-class ships have entered the system. Their coordinate destination will bring them towards this facility."

"Good. We have much to prepare then."

* * *

>"What's waiting for us down there Cortana?" the Master Chief asked the A.I from the bridge of Honor Without Mercy. Many of the Elites had gathered on the ship's bridge to watch the monitors.

"Take a look for yourself," Cortana said, bringing up images of an empty stretch of field. Hundreds of Scorpion-class tanks were poised and waiting at the far end of the field, along with several squadrons of Longsword fighters surveying the air.

"It seems they are not willing to take many chances," the Arbiter mused softly. He glanced briefly at the other Elites and saw that most of them had their attention split between the monitors and himself.

"Jan and me will go our first, along with the Arbiter," the Master Chief announced. "With Commander Keyes and Cortana aboard they wouldn't think to open fire on the ship."

"Alright," Cortana responded before Keyes could interject. "But there isn't a platform on the ground level to stabilize the gravity lift, so expect a somewhat choppy landing."

"We'll be fine," the Chief said, though his gaze was now focused on the girl standing next to him.

As the ship slowly descended through Earth's atmosphere the bridge grew quiet, and all eyes were soon focused on the images of the defensive measures the UNSC had gathered. The Scorpion tanks tacked the ship as it continued its decent, and those aboard could almost feel the destroyers in orbit around Earth keeping their MAC guns still trained on their craft.

"We're in position, good luck you three," Cortana said. The Master Chief nodded slightly at Cortana's image before leading Jan off the

bridge, the Arbiter tailing close behind.

"I believe this is the first time I'll ever have touched human soil without having seen it burned by our fleet," the Arbiter announced. Jan looked somewhat offended, but the Master Chief laid a hand lightly on her shoulder. He knew the Arbiter meant no harm from what he said.

"Let's hope you're never in the position to do so again," John replied. No one offered any other comments as they reached the main grav lift. John glanced briefly at Jan, before grabbing hold of her hand and stepping into the lift. They were out of sight before the Arbiter could blink.

The Elite glanced down briefly. He shook his head slightly before he too, disappeared down the lift.

* * *

>Author's Notes: Hmm, things are progressing nicely here. The next chapter will be a doozy, trust me. We'll have more elaboration on what happened to the Forerunner ship, as well as what the creature that was speaking to a monitor is.<p><p>

Thanks for the reviews everyone, each little e-mail I get saying I got a review is like an extra cup of coffee that keeps me awake longer to get these chapters churned out faster.

12. The End of a War Chapter 11

The End of a War

Chapter 11

I Bet You're Not Reading This

The underground fortress of ONI Section III headquarters on Earth is quite extensive. Burrowing more than several kilometers below the surface, the capacious design was a testament to the overzealous paranoia of high ranking ONI officials. Security checkpoints were numerous, and the further an individual went, the more intensive the security became.

Even those that had not found the security measures in place to be too intrusive, would have reversed that opinion when they saw what had been quickly put into place when Honor Without Mercy entered Earth's atmosphere. Entire Marine garrisons had been called upon to be stationed around the facility. There had been too many M808B Scorpion Main Battle Tanks positioned to count, and the same went with the SAF (Skyhawk Atmospheric Fighter) squadrons.

The Arbiter found himself amazed at first by the massive amount of firepower, as he was driven in a M12 LRV Warthog towards the ONI facility. The vehicle was a modified version with a back seat installed. The Master Chief sat beside him with two Marines posted up front. One drove while the other kept an M90 shotgun pointed at the Elite. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the Arbiter couldn't stop himself from applying a tactical eye to the UNSC presence.

_Three of their tank battalions are bunched together, while two others are out of formation. Should a hostile target enter the area they could be outflanked on their left, with a pincer strike from the northwest. An orbital bombardment of four Capital ships would reduce this force to cinder in but three shots. This mobilization was ordered hastily, and not distributed properly, _the Arbiter thought, keeping his body lax so as not to give the Marine any excuse to unload his weapon into him.

When they had first landed on the planet's surface, it had been several minutes before the UNSC forces did anything other than focus their attention on the three of them. A jeep had rode up, and a Marine Colonel had approached them. He spoke to the Master Chief, pointedly avoiding locking gazes with the Arbiter.

The Spartan had informed the Colonel that the Marines could back off, Cortana had control of the ship, and the Covenant aboard were not hostile. There had been a moments indecision on the part of the Marine, but he had issued the order for the force to stand down, though the Arbiter knew well enough that all that meant was the soldiers no longer had their hands poised a millimeter away from firing their weapons.

With _Honor Without Mercy_ no longer in immediate danger, Commander Keyes came down from the ship and spoke with the Marine Colonel. There was no real protocol for a situation like this, as no one on Earth had ever expected it to occur. The only decision the two soldiers could agree on was that the Admiralty needed to be enlightened over the recent developments involving the Human/Covenant War. ONI seemed more than willing to meet the Arbiter, which had aroused the Elite's suspicions.

The pomp and circumstance of getting into the facility seemed almost ridiculous to the Arbiter. He had been searched several times for weapons of any kind, yet each stop they encountered he was forced to suffer the indignity of the process all over again. The security check had proven to be somewhat useful however, as once they reached the inner workings of the facility the Master Chief had been forced to remove his helmet and be subjected to a retinal scanner.

_The Demon is no different on the outside than any of these humans, _the Arbiter mused as they boarded an elevator that he presumed would take them further down into the facility. Though the design was expertly built, the Arbiter could tell that they had begun to descend below the planet's surface.

The Arbiter felt that perhaps he was much too calm with the situation, but despite that something was nagging at the back of his mind.

"So tell me Demon, are these ONI humans your leaders?" the Arbiter asked the Spartan, who had been standing motionless in the elevator, along with their Marine escorts.

"Why would the Master Chief give any information to an enemy, especially a traitor to his own cause," one of the Marines asked, though no question was held within his statement. The Arbiter barely cast the soldier a look, though the glint in his eye was enough to pass the message that saying something like that again would put his

life at risk.

"The Office of Naval Intelligence," the Master Chief elaborated, much to the surprise of the Marines, "are not the leaders of human-kind."

"Oh?" the Arbiter questioned. "Then who is?"

The Spartan became silent, much to the approval of the Marines who presumed the Master Chief was putting the Arbiter in his place. The Arbiter however knew differently.

He doesn't know. The indiscernible shift of his weight onto his left side showed his hesitation. Should I be surprised? How long has it been since I have been on my home world? The Demon is a soldier bred for war, as am I, he is not meant to know peaceful times or peaceful places. The politics involved in every day life are a mystery to him.

"We're here," one of the Marines announced as the doors slid open. A long corridor was brought into view, decorated with many different portraits of what appeared to be battles and commanders. The Arbiter could understand humanity wishing to glorify the victories of the past and the few in the present. They had been fighting a losing war, where morale becomes more of a key issue than actual strategies.

Marines weren't posted every few feet in this hallway, unlike all of the others. A pair of soldiers were posted on the sides of the lone door in the corridor, and they looked as if they would shoot the Arbiter should he even breathe the wrong way. Despite their obvious advantage over him, the Arbiter could see fear in their eyes.

They do not fear me, they fear what I represent.

The Arbiter breathed out loudly, pushing the doors open and stepping inside.

* * *

>Karktanus stood on the bridge of the Covenant flag-ship Purity of Devotion, and cast a weary eye at the wreckage that lay before his fleet. The remains of the holy city High Charity, and the Sacred Ring brought a wave of sadness running through his body.

_The cursed Sangheili are to blame for this atrocity, _he raged in his mind. _There ineptitude has brought the Sacred Journey into peril._

Karktanus and the other Covenant under his command had been patrolling a few systems away when transmissions had been sent to their fleet from Chieftain Tartarus. The Sangheili were being expunged from the Covenant, by order of the High Prophet of Truth. The Unggoy and the Lekgolo had joined the Sangheili, proving their disloyalty to the Prophets. Karktanus had taken pleasure in informing the Jiralhanae under his command of their mission. The ships in his fleet had set their coordinates for the holy city High Charity, and spent the time in Slip Space planning on how they would tear the Sangheili to pieces when they arrived.

The sight that awaited them however, had not been anticipated. High Charity was in ruins, along with the glorious fleet that had been under its command. The Holy Ring, the site of the beginning of the Great Journey was in a similar state.

"Doyen," a Jiralhanae seated before the ship's scanner spoke, "I am not detecting any signals."

"Keep searching," Karktanus growled. "Chieftain Tartarus would not have perished before the worthless Sangheili."

Snarling to himself, Karktanus returned to the display showing the remains of the two shattered artifacts.

What has happened here?

The Holy Ring was in tatters, and the completion of the Great Journey had been stalled once more. Karktanus and his fleet had seen the remains of the first Holy Ring after the Demon had destroyed it. The destruction had been orchestrated, and left the Holy Ring in pieces but this abolition was far worse. It was as if the Gods themselves had lashed out, shattering High Charity as well as the Holy Ring.

"_Divine Foresight _is hailing," a Jiralhanae announced. "They have detected a threshold low near the planet's atmosphere."

"Inform them that they shall investigate the outpost immediately, and to report back once they have news," Karktanus ordered. "They shall tread carefully however, there is something wrong here."

* * *

>If I were not waiting upon death's door, I do believe I would find the irony of this situation amusing.

The Arbiter stood in the center of the room, his gaze focused on those in front of him, hidden within the shadows. He had been requested to stop in his current position by one of the many humans within the room. The Demon stood behind at the back of the room, per the order of a single human female.

Mankind shared more similarities with the Covenant than they knew. The Arbiter had been subjected to a trial aboard High Charity, where the Prophets used large crowds to humiliate and intimidate him. These humans used a different tactic, but they were for the same purpose. Keeping their profiles hidden, these humans used an act of abhorrence to influence whoever they were subjugating the tactic upon. The two tactics were different, yet existed for the same purpose, and the Arbiter was certain that should he not have already lost everything he would have knuckled under their attempts.

I wonder if the Demon has ever been subjected to this.

The sound of a human clearing his voice caught the Arbiter's attention but he did not move his head to incline the person. If these humans wanted to feel as if they had dominance upon him than so be it, but he would not bow before their coercion.

"The detailed reports sent to us by Cortana and Commander Miranda

Keyes have explicitly dealt with the events that occurred aboard the Covenant city High Charity, as well as the ring world," one of the figures spoke. "I would ask you to explain in your own words exactly what happened."

The Arbiter was careful to keep his body loose and his voice neutral.

"As you wish," he started. "When word reached High Charity that the Prophet of Regret hadâ€¦"

* * *

>"Doyen, Divine Foresight is not responding," the executive officer aboard the _Purity of Devotion_ announced to Karktanus. Their ship had begun to weave its way through the damaged remains of High Charity, moving towards the structure _Divine Foresight_ had detected earlier.

"Continue hailing," Karktanus ordered. "Their last transmission was cut short, I want to know what they found."

"At once," the officer said, exiting the bridge.

The Commander of Divine Foresight is disciplined enough to know not to ignore a Fleet Commanders messages. Even if the Commander was somehow indisposed, the Holy One is aboard the ship. Something has happened. Could they have found remaining Jiralhanae? Or perhaps some Sangheili vermin somehow survived by cowering on the threshold while their pathetic species was wiped away from the Covenant.

Karktanus' musings were cut short when the executive officer returned.

"Doyen, _Divine Foresight _has disengaged from the structure in orbit above the planet and is turning back."

"Show me," Karktanus demanded. At once a screen appeared, showing a Covenant cruiser turning slowly away from the threshold.

"Send a transmission to the_ Divine Foresight_, demand that they respond immediately."

"They do not respond to our transmissions sir," the officer said helplessly.

Karktanus snarled audibly and pointed at the screen displaying _Divine Foresight_.

"Scan the ship, there is something amiss aboard that ship."

"Scanners offline, Doyen," a Jiralhanae announced. "They are being blocked by something."

Before his temper could explode, Karktanus looked at the image of _Divine Foresight._

"What is their intended coordinates," he asked. A Jiralhanae on the bridge brought up a display and after a few moments turned.

"Their course is going to bring them into a collision course with this ship, Doyen."

Snapping into action, Karktanus opened up the battle net for the entire fleet.

"Ready plasma cannons and turrets. _Divine Foresight_ is to be destroyed at once," he turned to the navigator. "Bring the ship about and get us out of this debris field."

The order came too late however, as _Divine Foresight_ closed the gap between the two cruisers. The shields for both ships flared into existence for a moment before fading completely. The nose of _Divine Foresight_ slammed into the port side of _Purity of Devotion_. The two cruisers resisted one another, until the hull of _Purity of Devotion_ cracked. As both ships lost power, they became crushed together.

Karktanus felt light slowly return to his eyes as he clumsily climbed to his feet. His hands fell on the console for the ships communications. He fumbled with them for a moment before accessing the battle net for the entire fleet. Numbly he noticed the discarded bodies of his crew.

"This is the _Purity of Devotion_, I request immediate assistance."

Silence greeted his plea, and Karktanus angrily slammed his fists upon the console, pushing himself away. He wavered uncertainly before walking out of the bridge. Fires were spreading down the corridors of the ship, yet the Jiralhanae paid them no attention as he continued. Crewman of the ship were littered about the hallways, some alive but injured, while a great many lay unmoving, their lives snuffed out.

Before he really knew what he was doing, Karktanus found himself before the doors that would lead him into the damaged hulls where the _Divine Foresight_ had crashed. His footsteps echoed down the corridor, heavy contrasts to the groaning metal and alarms. The doors slid open, granting him entrance.

By the Rings!

Panic flooded the Jiralhanae, and he was turning to run the moment the scene before him registered. Panting heavily he ran, his hands coming down to grant him greater speed as he raced back to the bridge. In his hurried state he neglected to power down the doors leading into the bridge.

Karktanus searched for, and found his discarded plasma rifle. Clutching it tightly, he slumped against the far bulkhead, keeping the weapon aimed at the command access ways.

How did they manage to get aboard? The destruction of High Charity and the Sacred Ring should have eliminated their presence.

The sound of the far doors activating and sliding open caught Karktanus' attention. His eyes focused on the darkened area, lit only by the fires that filled the corridors. He saw them then, and ice

filled his veins, and his finger slammed down on the trigger of his plasma rifle.

The Parasite are here!

Infectious forms began pouring through the access ways, hundreds of them spilled forth, heading straight for Karktanus. The Jiralhanae fired his rifle continuously, his shots ripping through the masses of parasites. His panicked state refused him the necessary awareness to tell when the weapon was close to overheating, and as such when plasma spilled forth from the weapon, the only warning he had was the pain the action extracted upon him.

The plasma rifle fell from his hand, clattering to the deck floor.

I will not die here!

Karktanus let his survival instincts take reign, his consciousness mind slipping away as his posture changed to that of an animal. He began rampaging through the parasite, the small infectious forms ripped apart underneath his relentless assault.

The Jiralhanae's rampage was cut short however, when several long tentacles slipped unnoticed into the bridge of the ship. Lashing out savagely they slammed Karktanus to the deck and pinned him. Snarls of rage spilled forth from him, tearing at the tentacles with all his strength but gaining no purchase.

"Know that the rest of your feline race shall join you in death soon, beast."

The sickening voice filled the room, as the tentacles pinning Karktanus to the deck tightened, until the audible sound of his bones snapping came. As the infectious forms swarmed the fallen Jiralhanae, silence descended throughout the ship.

* * *

>John watched, his body motionless as the Arbiter continued his recount of the events that had transpired only a few days ago. The Admiralty and other ONI officials had neglected to stop the Elite from once yet, and the Spartan found himself wondering if perhaps they were being forced to rethink whatever plan they had already devised before the Arbiter had arrived.<p><p>

The Arbiter's words aboard _Honor Without Mercy_ were still fresh in his mind, and John stewed over them as the Elite recanted. If what he said was true, then the officers were likely to kill all the ex-Covenant on Earth.

But would they throw away such an opportunity to turn the tides of the war? John asked himself. _The Arbiter holds some sway within the Elite culture, and he isn't interested in continuing the war against humanity. If he could convince the leaders of the Elites that working with the humans would guarantee the Covenant's destruction, than mankind would be saved. _

The many different factors that could be applied to the situation were confusing to the Spartan. He was used to having things in black

and white. Do what is necessary to win, at all costs. If joining forces with the expunged Covenant members would help turn the odds in their favors, then he saw no problems with it. Despite the nagging feeling that these creatures had murdered millions of civilians and even his own fellow Spartans, John couldn't help but find that working with them made a lot more sense than fighting two wars at once.

Dr. Halsey's last words suddenly came to him, and he felt they justified his decision. Joining together and fighting the Covenant would save far more lives than the alternative.

Another question arose in his mind. If the discarded Covenant members and humanity joined forces, even under the best of circumstances how long could that alliance last? John's eyes fell upon the Arbiter once more as his mind stewed over that question.

Despite the overzealous nature of theirs, the Elites are honorable. They hold their pride above all else, and follow the code of the warrior. To be cast aside and killed like dogs by orders of the Prophets will be a huge blow to the mindset of the Elites. Their efforts will be focused on revenge. Even if they wanted humanity's assistance, their pride might make them refuse to accept it.

The sound of the back doors opening caught John's attention, and he turned his head lightly. Commander Miranda Keyes stepped quietly into the room, closing the door behind herself as she moved to stand next to the Spartan.

"How's it going?" she whispered. Her eyes didn't fall on the Arbiter, but looked past him to the shadows where the ONI officials sat.

"Ma'am, the officers requested the Arbiter recount his experiences on Delta Halo and High Charity," John said smartly, his hand twitching slightly from the effort he exerted to not snap a salute. Commander Keyes sighed quietly, running a hand over her face briefly.

"They're just trying to wear him down," she explained. "Once he's finished they'll hit him with questions from all around, and try to throw him off-balance."

"Ma'am?" John asked, confused.

"ONI's looking for some scapegoats, Chief," Keyes clarified. "The civilian masses are cowering in their homes, just waiting for the first waves of plasma bombardment to start raining down from the skies."

"The Covenant fleet has been taken care of," John interjected. Keyes shot him a brief look before smiling to herself.

"That's not too terribly important right now," she said. "Sure the fleets been destroyed, but there will certainly be another one, and most people can place a safe bet that they'll arrive much sooner than the time it'll take to fix up the orbital defense grid."

"Right now ONI's main concern is keeping the public from panicking. They want control over the public, either through propaganda or by holding a fake trial for an ex-Covenant member. This is the type of

stuff they usually deal with. Its this kind of garbage that makes it so we can't even list the Spartans as killed in action."

John winced slightly at that. The news that Fred, Linda, and Will had survived somehow earlier had lessened the blow, but it was still another reminder of how much he had failed his team over the course of his fighting career.

"Having a public execution of a high-ranking Elite would be just the thing to get the public back on their side," Keyes continued.

"But if they aren't in the Covenant anymore, than executing them would be pointless," John pointed out.

"Exactly," Keyes nodded. "That's precisely why we're going to have to make sure these scavengers don't do something that stupid."

Before John could reply, Commander Keyes had pushed off the wall and was walking towards the Arbiter. He followed, dimly aware that the room was somewhat silent, signifying that the Elite must have finished relating his story.

There was a moment of silence before someone seated near the head of the room spoke up.

"I will put but one question before you, Arbiter," the gruff voice said. "If you have indeed been cut off from the Covenant, along with the rest of your kind, than what would you have us do?"

John stopped a few paces behind the Arbiter, next to where Commander Keyes stood. The Arbiter cast a look to the ground for a moment before looking back up.

"I would have you do nothing, but I am aware as well as you that the humans need as much help as you can get in this war."

"And whose fault is that?" a new voice demanded. "You've led the campaign from planet to planet, murdering all who inhabit them. You commit genocide upon us for no reason other than our existence offends you, and then you come asking for our assistance!"

That heated outburst seemed to spark something among the others seated around the room, as angry retorts began firing at the Elite from all directions.

"Be silent," the original gruff voice ordered, and immediately the noise ended. "You can understand our position can't you? Why the concept of working with you would seem so unappealing?"

The Arbiter answered softly, and John was sure that if the Elite had eyes in the back of his head he would be focused on the Spartan.

"I understand it better than you'd think."

"We are wasting our time speaking to this creature," another voice chimed in. "A public execution of such a high-ranking Covenant member would surely get a high approval rating from the public."

"That would be a foolish mistake, and you know it," Commander Keyes interjected. She shot a scornful glare towards the owner of the

voice, and John surmised that despite the inability to see who had spoken, Keyes knew exactly who it was.

"Be silent Commander," the man barked. "This bastard, by his own admission, led the fleet that destroyed Reach. He was a tool of the Covenant, and you want us to turn around and forgive him?"

"If you are perhaps deaf than I suppose you missed the explanation in mine and Cortana's report where we detailed how the Prophets deceived the Elites. Along with the Hunters and the Grunts, the Elites were pushed into believing they were acting on the behalf of the Forerunners, who were revered as Gods."

John could almost swear that he could see the officer Keyes was speaking too, from the redness that had flooded onto his face. Before the angry retort could be fired off, John stepped forward, standing beside the Arbiter.

"Commander Keyes is correct. As Cortana and I traveled through High Charity, we were witness to the beginning of the extermination of the Elites, Hunters, and Grunts."

Silence greeted his response, and it was a moment before the same officer from before snorted indignantly.

"You, you expect us to take your word?" the officer asked scornfully. "The first chance you get you befriend our enemy. Aren't these the same creatures that killed off the majority of your team? Didn't Dr. Halsey bother to program a sense of loyalty into you freaks?"

John felt his temper spark, but before he could respond a fist slammed down upon the table that the ONI officers were gathered around.

"That is quite enough Colonel. Step out of line again and you will be sent to work as a maintenance crewman aboard one of the MAC guns."

There was a moment of tense apprehension before there was the sound of a muted apology and the sound of the officer sitting back down into his chair.

"Turn the Goddamn lights on," the same officer that had just issued the reprimand ordered. "If we want to intimidate someone lets try and do it to someone that actually needs it."

The lights came up immediately, and the other occupants of the room were finally brought into perspective. John immediately recognized the officer that had come to his defense as General Strauss. The general had pinned many medals onto him in the past.

"Alright, Arbiter, lets cut the bullshit and get down to the facts," General Strauss said. "Before we can even begin to negotiate some kind of truce, or partnership between us, there has to be some kind of show of grace. Information maybe, anything that would show us that you truly intend to do this."

For the first time in a long moment the Arbiter spoke.

"I am afraid my knowledge of what has been going on in the Covenant

has been severely limited. As a commander of a fleet I rarely returned to our home planet, and as such the most I possess is information on where our fleets have been deployed."

"A home world you say?" Strauss questioned. "I'll need you to divulge some more information on that as well. Maybe you could enlighten us to just why the Covenant is so intent on worshipping the Forerunner, and exterminating all of mankind."

A ghost of a smile seemed to pass over the Arbiter's face for a moment, and John cast a worried glance at the Elite.

"Every member of the Covenant knows of how we were formed, and what our purpose is."

"Could you elaborate on that?" Strauss asked.

The Arbiter took a deep breath, glancing briefly at John.

"Alright, then I shall tell you, how the Covenant came to be."

* * *

>Author's Notes: Wow, that chapter was quite interesting. Its one of the longest so far, so that's good, I stayed up far too late writing, so I hope you all like it.<p><p>

This chapter is going to be the lead in for something I'm sure some of you can see coming now. I'm betting some people may not like it, but it has to be done.

Just to elaborate on a few things, I know the Arbiter may seem to be a tad out of character in this story, but you've really got to take into consideration that the guy's been through a hell of a shock. I know I wouldn't want to spend my life devoted to a task, carrying out the systematic genocide of an entire race and then find out its all been a lie. I couldn't imagine what I'd do in that situation.

Anyways, thanks to everyone that's been reviewing. If you didn't believe me when I said reviews are like shots of caffeine into my blood stream, than perhaps the quickness of this chapter's release will have convinced you.

13. The End of a War Chapter 12

A/N: Wow, this was a hard chapter to write. Both because of the style, and all the new stuff. Surprisingly the length wasn't really an issue, which should be good news for all you readers. I'll be able to make all my chapters close to this length from now on I think.

**I warned you guys, this chapter is going to be something different. So prepare yourselves before venturing downwards. Also remember this, the way to understand what's going in this chapter is to have a basic understanding of the Covenant history, and to look at the title of this chapter. It is very very very very important. If you require the necessary knowledge of the Covenant's past, I recommend googling 'Halo Library' and finding the first site the pops up. **

The End of a War

Chapter 12

Second Age of Abandonment

The ancient city sprawled far beyond where the eyes could pierce, it's buildings reaching both high and low upon the horizon. Crumbling stone contrasted against the strength each piece of architecture represented, along with the strewn corpses laid about in the streets. Blood stained the roads, creating a shimmer upon the ground of a purplish hue. The lone ridgeline that surveyed the city provided cover for the group of Sangheili, as they watched the muted streets for any sign of life.

Heat poured down from the cloudless sky, bearing down relentlessly upon the soldiers. It became evident that the bodies scattered about had been there for some time, as the stench produced from the heat was enough to make the seasoned warriors recoil.

Aki Forlumees stood on the tip of the ridge, casting a hardened gaze towards the carnage below. The Sangheili stood high, taller than the other soldiers around him. Sweat beaded down from his sloped head and neck. The armor he wore was light, and superficial, meant to impose his presence instead of protect against actual threats.

"There is no sign of the vermin, Commander," a Sangheili announced from off to the side. Forlumees turned slightly to scrutinize the soldier.

"The bodies in the streets would tell a different story," Forlumees commented as he stepped down from his perch. The eyes of his warriors followed him, a fact the Sangheili was conscious of. He kept his strides even, relaxed with a stiff look about the rest of his body. It was important he appear not overly concerned with the situation. Soldiers feed off their superiors, and when a commander begins to look harried the troops start to get worried.

Forlumees glanced wearily at the distant city one last time before turning back to the other Sangheili. Each warrior was tense, and the seasoned commander knew that they wished to rush upon the city and avenge the murder of their brethren that littered the streets. Haste and emotion would guarantee their deaths however, and Forlumees needed to strategize their assault upon the city.

"High Councilman Garsunees sent a transmission late the previous evening, informing Lord Mortumees that the invaders had landed on the outskirts of Akhenaten. Defense posts were established, and the innocent were taken into shelter. Early this morning two heathen ships bombarded the outer defenses of this city with their weaponry from low orbit. An urgent message from Councilman Garsunees was the last bit of information we received."

The Sangheili commander pointed out towards the city.

"We have confirmed several things from this attack upon Akhenaten. Our enemy can coordinate with the ships they have used to infiltrate our home world. Also, they bear no mercy towards the innocent and the weak. If they do not show mercy to us, we shall do the same for

them."

Snarled responses greeted him, and Forlumeer felt his mouth twist slightly into a smile.

Those creatures will soon learn the folly of their actions. The High Council will be mobilizing our forces and we will strike out at these heathens. The stain they've left upon our world will be washed away by their blood.

* * *

><p><p>

The High Prophet of Law watched intently as the ship, _Order and Faith_ began to slowly descend into the planet's atmosphere. The ancient being appeared lax, with his hands clasped together behind his back and his body loose. Not a sound was emitted aboard the bridge as they watched, the seemingly infinitude of space bearing down upon all those that occupied it. Several of the other Prophets on the bridge of _Forgotten Legacy_ traded looks with one another as _Order and Faith_ disappeared from view.

A lone creature broke away from the group and approached the High Prophet of Law. He stopped several paces behind the ancient creature and cleared its throat, seemingly attempting to gain his attention.

"Excuse my impertinence your Holiness," the minor Prophet said. "But is it wise to send our only other vessel to the surface of those agnostic beasts? Would it not be wiser to use our Lord's ships to burn their existence away and descend without incident? While these barbarians have shown to be weak in mind and technology, they do possess strength, and their number is far greater than ours."

Stretched silence lasted for a few moments before the High Prophet of Law turned slightly, letting his gaze fall upon the minor Prophet.

"Do you presume to tell me what to do?"

The question held no apprehension, or anger, yet the Prophet recoiled as if it had been struck.

"O-of course not, your Holiness, I merely meant to suggest that we not commit ourselves to one action so soon," the simpering creature sputtered out. With a deep bow it quickly backed up until it had returned to its original position.

The High Prophet of Law turned back to gazing out of the bridge, but he continued speaking.

"We have searched for a boundless time, believing that our ancestors had left us clues to their great power. Our domicile world was destroyed because we did not believe in our lineage. Those that remained behind and did not join us on our great journey were purified along with those that were unbelievers. Our faith was rewarded when we escaped the destruction of our world, and once more the Gods smiled upon us when we discovered this world. I have

searched the ruins and lost documents of our Lords, the Forerunners, and they have left a piece of their legacy on this planet."

The minor Prophet that had spoken before dared to speak again, stepping forward slightly.

"Your Holiness, you speak the words of the enlightened and the wise, but what shall we do with the uncouth creatures that inhabit this world?"

The High Prophet turned once more to look upon the others gathered about.

"The question has already been answered," the High Prophet of Law explained. "The creatures of this planet, while ignorant of the heritage that the Forerunner have left behind, are strong and tactical. Their strength and devotion will serve us whilst we recover our Lords bequeathal."

"But how will we get them to serve us?" the minor Prophet asked.

"Savages are tamed when thrown a few scraps of meat, and this will be no different. We will give them a glimpse at the splendor and beauty of what we have sought to recover on this world. Deceiving them once they have become enraptured will be an easy task. Their existence will depend on us, as we are the offspring of a greater race, and an even greater civilization."

* * *

>Something is wrong.

Forlumees clutched the spear in his hands tightly, a cold feeling of dread slowly enveloping him. He turned and rested against the side of one of the buildings, one hand coming up to press against his chest.

Why am I filled with apprehension? I have fought these vermin before. There is no reason why I should fear them.

The Sangheili in his company had scattered out through the city, together in squads as they worked their way through the ancient structures. Already they had discovered several groups of the enemy. Their deaths had been quick, a factor Forlumees found himself loath to carry out, as he had wished to let their screams fill the air for the murder that had taken place within the city. Stealth and surprise was their upper hand however, and as such the enemy needed to be killed quickly, and soundlessly.

Something nagged at the back of the Sangheili Commander's head regardless, and he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The invading heathens had never stayed in a ravaged city before, and this break in tradition was puzzling to the warrior.

It is as if they have some duty here. Some kind of task that they must carry out.

Taking several clear breaths, Forlumees pushed off the wall and continued on his way. His spear held tight, the warrior ducked into

one of the buildings. These buildings had been constructed of clay and stone long ago, and their age was a testament to the true genius of the architecture. Akhenaten had been declared a Holy City, one of which would be preserved so that future generations of Sangheili could see the ingenuity and creativity of their ancestors. For many cycles the city had stood proud, and now these heathens were defiling it with their presence and the murder of innocent Sangheili.

Forlumees moved swiftly, his height and heavy build belayed his agility as he made not a sound with each passing step. He had meant to get his warriors angered and bloodthirsty so that they would eliminate the enemy no matter what happened, but it seemed as if his speech had gotten to Forlumees himself. His mandibles opened and snapped together hard, his inner instincts screaming at the urge to rip the flesh from the invaders with his own mouth. Pushing those thoughts aside forcibly, the Sangheili warrior slipped through another building, and heard alien voices up ahead.

_The vermin are searching for something, I am sure of it, _Forlumees reasoned. _As silent as we have been, it is inconceivable that they would not know of our presence here. Yet they still linger, their actions proclaiming their intent but still keeping us in the dark. What do they seek? Are they attempting to set up a camp? Or perhaps a command post?_

Forlumees inched towards the archway that led to where the voices were originating. Their strange dialect had yet to make sense, despite the many seasons the war between the two races had raged. The Sangheili High Council had scoffed at the idea of capturing some of the invading heathens to learn their language, deeming the action beneath them. Aki Forlumees wasn't one to question his superiors decisions, but at the moment he found himself wishing they had chosen otherwise.

Shifting the spear to his left hand, Forlumees pushed around the archway and headed straight for the group of invaders standing with a strange device in the middle of a back alley. One of them turned and was taken aback by the sight of Forlumees charging at them with a spear, and spoke fast to the others. Curved blades were pulled from their robes and they assumed a defensive position. The Sangheili had the advantage over them with his weapon, as he had learned from experience that while these creatures possessed crafts that could sail in the sky above his home world and shoot streams of fire, they were weak against combat on the ground. He was still wary however since while it would be little effort to eliminate one or two of these creatures, fighting four would require caution.

Forlumees's hands molded to the spear and he crouched low, keeping his legs apart. The Sangheili as a species possessed great balance, their hoof-like feet bestowed them with unfailing grace, and their legs were double-jointed which gave them superior leg strength. Tensing his body, Forlumees held the spear slightly below his chest, the sharpened blade on the end held out. His face was a mask of impassiveness, and he kept his eyes hard as they pierced into the aliens.

One of the creatures broke its stance and charged Forlumees, its blade held high. The Sangheili remained firm as he watched the alien grow closer, and begin to swing the blade it held through the air.

Reacting swiftly, Forlumees swung the spear across, knocking the creatures arm aside. As it stumbled forward, he flipped the spear around, and slammed the butt end of the shaft against the creature's skull. A satisfying crack filled the air as the body slumped to the ground, and Forlumees resumed his stance.

The remaining invaders looked unsettled, and without preamble they charged at the lone Sangheili. In a surprising motion, Forlumees turned and began to run back from where he had come. The aliens, thinking they had the advantage, began to chase.

Come fools, hurry to your death.

Slowing his pace, Forlumees glanced behind him to see that one of the aliens had begun to pull away from the other two. His speed would prove to be his undoing.

As the gap closed between the two races, Forlumees slammed his feet down to the ground, stopping himself mid-stride and pivoting he bent down to the ground, holding his spear at an angle so the blade pointed upwards. The alien could not stop himself in time, and was impaled upon the spear. The blade fell from his hands and clattered to the ground while it thrashed weakly. Tossing the spear aside with the creature still impaled, the Sangheili scooped up the blade that had been discarded. The remaining two creatures had stopped their charge, and were beginning to realize the peril of their situation.

"Run as far as you wish vermin," Forlumees sneered. "You will die this day, and so will the rest of your kind."

Almost as if they could understand the words he had spoken, the creatures turned and began to flee. Forlumees was faster nevertheless, and their bodies soon joined the others upon the ground. He cast aside the enemy's blade, and walked back to where he had left his spear. The creature had passed on in the time it had taken to kill the other two, and Forlumees spared it no second glance as he ripped his spear free.

What is it that these creatures were doing? Forlumees asked himself as he strode towards the device that the aliens had been attending to. Bending down he picked it up off the ground, studying it intently. It wasn't much larger than his palm. The device was spherical in design, and glowed with a strange light. A series of incomprehensive writings were written below the strange light. They appeared to be a string of triangles, lines, and dots. The dialect was unfamiliar to Forlumees, and he decided he would hold onto the device for now, and would turn it over to the High Council once the remaining vermin were exterminated.

Forlumees started off down the alley, but was stopped when he heard heavy steps coming his way. Pressing himself flat up against the wall, he moved down to the corner and waited, spear poised at the ready. His attack was held though, when two Sangheili warriors appeared.

"Commander!" one of them ground out as it panted.

"What is it? Has something happened?" Forlumees asked, the exhausted state of the warriors making him somewhat nervous.

"In the Council Chamber, we've found something," the other warrior explained. "You must see it."

Forlumeer felt a pulse of heat come from the device he had taken from the slain invaders, and his free hand flew to his side and pulled it out. The strange light had risen in intensity, causing spots to fill the Sangheili's vision. Forlumeer replaced the device and turned back to the other two warriors.

"I will come."

* * *

>"Excuse this unworthy one, your Holiness," a minor Prophet spoke from behind the High Prophet of Law. "The ship has received a signal. We have found the structure."<p><p>

The High Prophet of Law nodded absentmindedly and responded, "Keep me informed." His gaze did not leave the front of the bridge, where it had stayed for such a time that the others were beginning to grow uneasy.

There was a sense of urgency amongst the Prophets inhabiting the Forgotten Legacy, yet no one knew what it was they were expected to do. Leadership had fallen onto the shoulders of the High Prophet of Law as he was the most aged of all the Prophets that had escaped their home world before the purging and cleansing began. His motives however, aside from the blind faith devoted to the Forerunner heritage, was a mystery to all others. None could seek solace in his words, and yet there was not one of them that dared open their mouths to oppose him.

High Prophets possessed abilities that reached far and beyond what could be accomplished with physical limitations alone. Their minds were of such a breed that they could cultivate the physical morphology to the environment. Objects moved with simple motions was mere child's play to those of the hierarchy.

Their purpose on this world would remain a mystery to the Prophets however, and all of the Sangheili but one.

* * *

>The arrival at the Council Chamber, the site where the High Council members would meet and converse over the direction of the Sangheili culture, was timed at the exact moment the alien ship appeared above the city.<p><p>

Forlumeer had shouted an order for the Sangheili warriors gathered around and inside the chamber to retreat, but it had come too late. The ship sent a wave of fire washing over the chamber, burning the ancient structure down in a hail of rock and clay. Those that had been inside or close to the chamber had been killed in an instant.

Rage burned within the Sangheili Commander, but he forced himself to remain calm. The vermin scum that had ravaged his home would pay dearly for this atrocity, but he would first need to be given the opportunity.

That opportunity would have to wait however, since the alien ship began to fire at the surrounding buildings and homes. With his death literally moments away from falling upon him, Forlumees made a split-second decision. The ruins of the Council Chamber had only been attacked once, and if the words of the Sangheili warriors could be believed, something existed beneath it.

"Everyone into the Council Chamber!" Forlumees bellowed. His warriors stared back for a moment before understanding hit them and they rushed for the collapsed structure. The Sangheili Commander waited until he was sure all of his warriors that were alive had heard and begun to execute his order.

Pumping his legs hard Forlumees charged towards the wreckage of the ancient structure. The alien ship had understood his intention however, and Forlumees could almost feel the flames from their weapons closing the gap between them. His continued performance as a field commander proved useful however, for his repeated physical activity had kept him quick.

With a final push, Forlumees leapt into the crater that had once been the Council Chamber, and was pleased to note that his assumption had been correct. The alien ship had impeded its course and avoided his destination.

Tumbling down through melted rock and clay, the Sangheili Commander freefell for a long moment, his eyes wide as a vast underground lake opened up below the crater. He had only a few moments to revel in its beauty, for he quickly plunged into the water. The disorientation that enveloped him quickly faded and he swam upwards, breaking the surface loudly.

Casting his eyes about, Forlumees spotted his warriors emerging from the lake at some kind of beachhead. Without a second thought he began to swim towards it. As he swam, Forlumees began to puzzle over what had transpired moments ago.

This is the first time since our war began that the vermin scum have brought one of their crafts this close to our planet's surface. Whatever that is underneath the Council Chamber must be what they were searching for. How fitting that we will come to possess it before them.

Several of his warriors had stayed back and waited for him while he swam towards them, and they instructed him that what they had seen in the Council Chamber before was up ahead. Forlumees followed them wordlessly, his eyes working hard to adjust to the harsh darkness that prevailed around them.

By the time they had reached the others, he could make out an outline of something large in the distance. The Sangheili gathered before it did not even turn to regard Forlumees as he approached, so taken with it's splendor were they.

"Commander, have the High Council ever spoken of this structure before?" one of the warriors asked. Forlumees could only look up in awe at what captivated them all.

"No," he responded, at a loss for words. His riveted attention was

pulled away only when the device shoved into his armor began to produce a great warmth. As he reached in and pulled the device free, Forlumees had the good grace to warn the others to close their eyes. His warning proved well deserved when a flash of light was emitted so severe even their clenched eyes burned from the brightness produced.

The light burned away eventually, and Forlumees opened his eyes warily. The heat the device had produced still lingered, but the intensity of the light had faded, and now a dull glowing ebb remained. The written text he had noticed before now glowed brightly, their outlines seemingly lifted off the device and sustained within the air itself. Raising a hand tentatively, Forlumees pressed each icon, triangles, lines, and dots. Each icon that was pressed slowly dimmed, and finally the light produced from the device disappeared entirely, bathing the collected Sangheili in darkness once more.

A low hum caught their attention, and its origin was from the giant structure that lay before them. Forlumees stepped out purposely, his curiosity demanding he know what was going on. His steps carried him closer to the looming edifice, and he dimly noted that the other Sangheili had fallen in behind him. The incandescent feel of the device had disappeared, leaving behind a smooth cool feeling.

The imposing architecture of the building was even more evident as they approached, bringing an almost dread-like feeling to the handful of Sangheili warriors. Forlumees pressed on, regardless of what awaited them.

When they had come within a few feet of the large, spacious doors, a splitting hiss noise was omitted, and the doors slowly parted. With baited breaths they waited, expecting some kind of demon to reach out and rip them apart. Nothing came out, and with a glance at one another the Sangheili crossed the threshold, entering the structure.

_If only there was some light within this construct, we could see what awaits us, _Forlumees mused. He was quickly taken aback, as the moment that thought crossed his mind the room suddenly became lucent. The source of the light was beyond wherever their eyes could pierce, yet it did not fail to cover every corner.

"What is this place?" Forlumees spoke aloud. He had not intended to speak his thoughts, but it did not matter, as the other warriors were too captivated to respond.

Not an inch of space was without polish, every design upon the flooring and walls was marked with pristine glory. Light seemed to uncover every nook and cranny, despite the curving nature of the ceiling that would have normally cast the areas in shadow. The walls were outfitted with large metal braces, and the curved ceiling appeared to stretch on for eternity above them.

Aki Forlumees had never been so fascinated with a piece of architecture in his life. Everything about this edifice screamed to be revered and studied closely. Simply by being inside of the structure he felt as if his presence was defiling the virginal beauty of it. Looking at the other Sangheili he knew they felt the same way.

His inquisitiveness forced him to proceed regardless of his personal feelings, and he continued on his way. The entrance hallways had another set of sliding doors that parted when he approached, and they led into a spherical room with a central point of convergence. Forlumees legs carried him onward, as if they knew where he wanted to go. Exiting that room and continuing on, Forlumees noted that the others were no longer behind him, but it seemed of little consequence to him. The introversion of this structure was of more importance.

Eventually the grandly designed rooms tapered off into more secluded corridors that stretched for great distances. He continued on, undaunted and determined to see what lay at the end of this winding trail.

Forlumees was rewarded for his patience, as a final corridor led into a grand chamber. One that rivaled the architectural beauty of the entire edifice itself. A lone walkway led out to the center of the chamber and broke off into two separate paths that formed a circle. The device held within his armor began to ebb once more, but Forlumees paid it no mind as he lingered slightly before moving forward.

I have never witnessed such great beauty in my life. To think that such a structure has survived beneath our Holy City for such an extensive time. What creatures contrived this place? And for what purpose? Could this be a gift bestowed upon us by the Gods, to be used against our enemy in a time of need? Fate has dictated that we discover this structure, so a higher purpose must be preordained for us.

He stopped his advance before a console of some creation. Once more the controls seemed to exist within the air itself, suspended by some invisible force. Forlumees hand reached out, acting on its own and was about to press one of the icons when a shout sounded from behind him.

Snapping from his daze, Forlumees grabbed for his spear, only to remember he had dropped his weapon when he had plunged into the lake. He spun around to face the entrance to the chamber. Standing at the far end of the chamber were a group of the aliens. Snarling to himself for failing to notice them until they had snuck upon him, Forlumees tensed his body and prepared to charge head on with his enemy. The aliens seemed to be unconcerned however, as they parted ranks and cast glances back behind them.

Forlumees watched in confusion as another one of the aliens stepped into the chamber. It was decidedly older than any of the other invaders he had seen, and it gazed upon him with aged eyes that appeared as if they saw right through him. The elder alien spoke softly with the other aliens, then resumed its slow pace down the path that led straight to the Sangheili Commander. Forlumees felt himself grow tense unconsciously as it approached, but the seemingly impassive nature of the alien set his mind at ease.

"Do not fret, we mean you no harm."

Shock slammed into Forlumees as his native dialect was emitted from the alien. It had not occurred to him that the enemy would take the time to study their language when even the High Council had decided it to be a waste of time.

As Forlumees stared in surprise, the ancient alien seemed to smile at him.

"I see you are surprised," the creature said. "I believe it would come as quite a shock to you to know that we studied your society's language long before we invaded your planet."

_Why has this creature not attacked me? _Forlumees puzzled to himself. He was at a great disadvantage at the moment. He was unarmed, and the enemy outnumbered him greatly. Even with luck on his side he would be hard pressed to win any kind of engagement that might start.

"I am the Prophet of Faith, and I command the ship that lay siege to this city," the alien said simply. Forlumees felt his temper flare and prepared to lash out at the creature when the Prophet suddenly bowed its head low.

"For the unjust actions we have taken against your kind, I hold myself below you," the Prophet of Faith said, head still bowed. Forlumees forgot about his rage with the unfamiliar action taken by the Prophet, and watched in amazement as the creature remained in the same position.

"You may rise," Forlumees said, confused. As the Prophet rose, the Sangheili cast his eyes back to the entranceway where the other Prophets stood. "Where are the rest of my warriors?"

The Prophet of Faith turned and began to walk back out of the chamber, beckoning Forlumees to follow.

"I am afraid they were not so quick to listen to reason as you, and we were forced to dispatch them," the Prophet of Faith explained, his voice devoid of emotion. "We did not end their lives however, to stain this holy place with any creatures blood would be an act of transgression against the Gods themselves."

"You know of who built this place?" the Sangheili Commander asked.

"It was our ancestors, the Forerunner. This structure is one of many located in thousands of galaxies, a monument to their great society."

Falling into silence, the two Commanders began walking through the maze of rooms that would lead them back to the entrance. Once they arrived, Forlumees moved to the fallen forms of his Sangheili and was relieved to see that the Prophet had not deceived him. They still breathed.

"Tell me, Sangheili, how did you come to activate the doors of this structure?"

Despite Forlumees' confusion over the entire situation, he recognized a loaded question when he heard one. The device he had taken from the Prophets in the city streets seemed to grow hotter against his skin.

"As we approached the doors slid open. When we entered the structure became aglow with light."

Forlumees had kept his voice tight, and barren of any kind of emotion, yet he was certain the Prophet knew he had lied.

"I see," the Prophet of Faith said. "Well then, I would request of you to enter our ship so that we may go to meet your leaders, this development must be quickly sorted out, and I will require your assistance in ensuring our safety once we land."

"Of course," Forlumees responded, though the tone in the Prophet's voice set an uneasy feeling within him.

Why do I feel as if I have been deluded?

* * *

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"Our actions were harsh, and unprovoked. We the Prophets, offspring of the Forerunner, request that you overlook our overzealous actions."

Forlumees watched from the far end of the spherical chamber, where the Prophet of Faith was speaking with the leaders from the many tribes of the Sangheili. Their initial arrival had been subject to high scrutiny, as the entire city's guard had been raised when the alien ship was spotted approaching. When the only creature that descended from the craft was Aki Forlumees, the city as a whole was stupefied.

After a quick council with the tribe leaders, Forlumees had returned to the ship and once more descended, this time in the company of the Prophet of Faith. The initial reaction of the other Sangheili had been near open hostility, as one of the leaders to their embedded enemy was walking freely amongst them.

The Prophet of Faith had brought with him several objects, much like the one that Forlumees had found on the other Prophets. One of the devices had simply been a circular orb, made of a material the Sangheili had never seen before. The Prophet had brought the objects with him to demonstrate to the Sangheili leaders what it is the Prophets were searching for.

Simply by holding the orb aloft, and closing his eyes in concentration, the Prophet of Faith was able to cultivate an image that sprung forth from the orb. The image was being transmitted somehow by the orb, and was suspended within the air itself by an unknown force. Forlumees saw that what the Prophet of Faith showed the others were a series of structures similar to what he had discovered beneath the Council Chamber in Akhenaten. The tribe leaders and other Sangheili dignitaries had stared at the images in awe, much the same as Forlumees surmised he had done.

The uneasy feeling that had settled within him shortly after leaving the Forerunner structure had yet to dissipate. Something seemed entirely wrong with the whole situation, whether it was the Prophets' true motives or the purpose of the Forerunner structure, he did not know.

After the display had ended, the Prophet of Faith had explained how

the Prophets had been born on a Forerunner planet, and had left it in search of other Forerunner installations. The discovery of the Sangheili home world was confirmation that their journey had been determined by the Forerunner themselves.

The Prophet of Faith then spoke of how the identification of the Sangheili themselves upon the planet had blinded them with rage. The war that resulted from that was a test put upon them by the Forerunner to analyze their faith. He demonstrated this by explaining how the location of the Forerunner structure beneath the Sangheili city had only been discovered through the course of battle.

Now that there was confirmation that both races had originated on Forerunner planets, the war between them would be unnecessary, and an affront to the Gods.

Forlumees had noted that when the Prophet of Faith spoke of the Gods, it was almost as if he was fighting not to say the word 'Forerunner'. The Sangheili Commander admitted to himself that the Prophet had produced a compelling argument, and if he was not so suspicious of their motives he would have believed every word. The Prophet was holding something back, Forlumees could see it.

Throughout his speech the Prophet of Faith had kept his face impassive, but Forlumees was a skilled warrior and he knew how to read his enemies.

This Prophet is enraged. To prostrate himself before his mortal enemy, and speak with them as if they were an equal is demeaning to him. For him to force himself to do so means there is another Prophet who has ordered him to do this. But why? What purpose could these creatures have to try and end the war between us?

Forlumees was loath to admit, but each season the alien invaders had begun to push the Sangheili back, slowly and surely. City after city fell to their onslaught, and without any turn in their favor, they would soon be wiped out. For the enemy to suddenly turn around and declare peace, just as victory looked assured, what could be the purpose?

As he shifted his eyes to where the Sangheili tribe leaders sat, Forlumees noted that they were traded looks with one another.

They will accept this offer of peace, whether it is simply for the good of their people or for some other cause. Whatever the reason, the war between us shall end. Should this not fill me with glee? For such a time I have seen my brothers fall in combat, their lives ended prematurely. Would not my mate and my child be pleased? No longer shall I worry over their fates.

The concern did not fade, and Forlumees could do nothing more but dwell on it while the tribe leaders began to speak.

"You speak words of truth, noble Prophet," a tribe leader from the north said. "The technology you have presented us is proof of your holy task, and of the heritage that we share. If it is within my power I shall say there will be peace between us."

One by one the other tribe leaders pledged their offers of peace, until finally High Councilman Garsunees was left.

"I have watched for many seasons as this war has raged between our races. Watched as your ships burned our cities to the ground, murdering our innocent. Does the discovery of a link between our cultures somehow make all that disappear?"

Forlumeer felt a slow smirk spread on his face as Garsuneer's words echoed within him. The High Council member was one of the few political leaders the Sangheili Commander could respect. His concern and devotion to the Sangheili as a whole was renowned. As he turned, Forlumeer could see that the Prophet of Faith had not expected that outburst. His face had turned from surprise, to anger, and switched quickly back to impassiveness in the blink of an eye.

"I have spoken of our misdeeds, and wish to rectify what dishonorable grievances we have exacted upon your people. Our intent was pure, but our actions were overzealous. Should you request we leave your planet we shall do so, but I must ask you to do otherwise. The Forerunner placed their faith within us to carry out their legacy, and to continue their culture. Should we fall from that path even the Gods would not forgive us."

Garsuneer eyed the Prophet intently before grunting loudly.

"I will speak with the tribe leaders and we will decide what our course shall be, until then, I offer you sanctuary within the walls of this building."

_That offer is not as kind as the others think, _Forlumeer thought. _By keeping the Prophet here he can keep a close eye on him, and ensure that there is no trickery about._

As the council got up from their seats, Forlumeer moved from his spot in the far end of the chamber and walked towards the Prophet of Faith.

"I will show you to your chambers," he said as sincerely as possible. The Prophet followed wordlessly behind Forlumeer as he led him through the hallways of the inner chamber and into the east wing, where the sleeping garrison was housed. He showed the Prophet to a spare room and then parted with him, mentally noting that several other Prophets had followed them and gone in with the Prophet of Faith.

As Forlumeer returned to where the council had left, High Councilman Garsuneer stepped from the shadows before him.

"A word please, Commander," Garsuneer said, turning and walking into the chamber. It had since emptied save for a few Sangheili that talked amongst themselves over the new developments.

Garsuneer led him to the far end of the chamber, where Forlumeer had watched the proceedings. The elder Councilman stared out of the chamber where the city of Corinphi lay.

"Tell me what your thoughts are about these new developments. Are these Prophets speaking the truth?"

Forlumeer twitched his mandibles a few times as he collected his thoughts. Councilman Garsuneer would want to hear everything that he knew.

"I saw the Forerunner structure beneath the Council Chamber in Akhenaten. Whatever built that structure was a far more advanced race than the Sangheili," Forlumeesaid, slightly uneasy about talking with a High Council member as an equal, but Garsunee did not seem troubled so he continued.

"There is truth in what the Prophets say, their ships that can sail within the sky and reign fire upon our cities is a testament to that. They are indeed descendants of the Forerunner, or they at least possess their technology. Whatever their reasons for stopping their campaign against us, we must be thankful that it has come."

"You do not believe they are contrite over their invasion of our world?" Garsunee asked, and Forlumeeshook his head slowly.

"No, or at least the Prophet of Faith does not. He may have acted with humility but he loathed every moment of it. There must be someone of a higher rank that is forcing him to do this, and I cannot say for certain just why that is."

Garsunee nodded his head and seemed to look off in space for a moment.

"Thank you for your time Commander," Garsunee said finally, and Forlumeebowed low to him. He was surprised when the Councilman's hand fell upon his shoulder. "You should be commended for your skill in battle, and your even greater skill out of it."

Forlumeepuzzled over Garsunee's parting words as he decided to return to his barracks. The Sangheili Commander yearned to return to his dwelling inside the city, and see his mate along with his newborn child, but duty came first. He would return to his home early the next morning before the day began.

Unlike many of the Sangheili, Forlumeecould read and write, and he had taken to keeping notes on his battles as a Commander lately. The scrolls of paper had been his only indulgence since his promotion to Commander, and he greatly enjoyed keeping logs of what occurred from day to day. He sat upon the chair before his desk and readied the ink. Pausing slightly to collect his thoughts, Forlumeeunconsciously fingered the strange devise he still held with him, and then began to write.

_From whence I came to this city earlier today, I had thought my time would be spent preparing for battle and then taking back the city of Akhenaten. True this is how things began, but quite quickly things turned away from the norm. _

I recovered a strange relic that wasâ€|

* * *

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The night air was a welcome addition to the stressful nature that had followed throughout the day. Aki Forlumeestood upon the upper balcony of the Council Chamber, watching the city sleep. The gentle breeze brought with it a calming notion, seemingly lifting all of his worries away. The Prophet ship that floated off to the far end of the

city was the only thing that detracted from the moment, and Forlumees wished it would move, as its looming presence was a constant reminder of what had occurred.

Once he had finished his writings, Forlumees placed the strange device he had retrieved in with his papers, and then taken a light stroll around the council chamber. Aside from a few guards, the entire city appeared to be asleep. His wanderings eventually brought him up to the balcony that looked out upon Corinphi.

Would this night never end, perhaps my mind would finally be at peace.

Resigning himself, Forlumees was about to rise from the balcony ledge when he felt something fall against him. His instincts kicked in, and the Sangheili caught what had fallen on him. He nearly dropped it though, when he realized he was holding Councilor Garsunees. A large gash had been sliced across the elder's chest, and blood spilled from the wound.

"Forlûees," the strangled gasp escaped the elder Sangheili as his life drained before Forlumees's eyes. The Sangheili Commander watched in a stupor as the Councilor's blood covered his hands and arms.

Footsteps falling behind him snapped Forlumees out of it and he cradled Garsunees's lifeless body in his arms and turned. Three Prophets stood at the entrance of balcony, blades drawn. One of their weapons was stained red, and the Sangheili Commander snarled at the creature, setting Garsunees's body upon the ground.

"I knew you scum were incapable of peace!"

Forlumees urged his body forward, his body already tensing to rip the Prophets apart, but it would not respond. The Prophet with the bloody dagger slid the blade along the ground out in front of him, and Forlumees reached down and picked it up against his will.

What is happening to me? Why can't I move?

As the Sangheili struggled, the Prophet of Faith emerged from the shadows of the balcony and moved towards them, amusement playing across his features.

"The power of the wisest amongst the Prophets is nothing to sneer at you animal."

Forlumees screamed inside of his mind as his muscles began to spasm from his exertions.

"The Council will have your body paraded through the streets!" the Sangheili growled as the dagger in his hand inched closer to his throat. A laugh spilled forth from the aged Prophet and he looked down at Garsunees's corpse beside Forlumees.

"It will not be my corpse that shall be ravaged fool. Councilor Garsunees was murdered by you after he refused to listen to your pleas of continuing the war against us, and when you realized what you had done, you took your own life. I'm sure the other councilors will understand, as such a high amount of tension on your shoulders has

made you break under the weight of it all."

"Damn you."

No sooner had the words left Forlumees mouth that the dagger in his hands slid across his throat, cutting deeply into his larynx and cutting off any further retorts.

The Prophet of Mercy turned to the other Prophets and gestured for them to leave.

"Come, we must make sure no one has seen us. The bodies will be discovered early in the morning."

Forlumees felt his eyes burn with unbidden tears.

I don't want to die.

* * *

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The bodies of Aki Forlumees and High Councilman Garsunees were discovered the next morning by a patrolling Sangheili guard.

The High Prophet of Law arrived on the planet that day, and together with the tribe leaders and other councilors, created a binding oath amongst them. A binding contract all Prophets and Sangheili were forced to follow.

The Covenant was created as the final rays of light disappeared.

* * *

>Author's Notes (again) : Well, there you go. The Age of Abandonment. There's still 5 other untouched Ages to go however, so don't think we're out of the woods just yet.<p><p>

If anybody skimmed through the chapter I must say that it would be in your best interest to read the entire thing. Everything that occurs in this chapter has heavy foreshadowing towards where this story is headed.

Thanks everybody, this chapter took a little bit longer than usual to get out. Review and let me know what you think, be it good or bad.

14. The End of a War Chapter 13

Author's Notes: sigh I was pleased to see so many people enjoyed my look into the Covenant's past, but unfortunately I received several e-mails asking me just what the hell was going on in that chapter. I've attributed this to people not reading the large, bolded author's notes I put at the top of the chapter, and I suppose I'm pissing in the wind to think that if they skipped that author's note, they'll most likely skip this one and be thoroughly confused once more.

**I will reiterate then, if you are indeed one of the people that

reviewed or e-mailed me about a lack of understanding then please READ THIS! You will all remember that at the end of Chapter 11, the Arbiter agrees to explain how the Covenant was created. What we've got here is a look into the Covenant's past, without me having to make a big long boring couple of chapters with just the Arbiter talking. By doing things differently, I now can also add in foreshadowing to later plot developments that will become very important later on in the story, and give us all a look into certain events that not even the Arbiter knows about.**

There are seven Covenant Time periods, called Ages. Within each Age, there are more time periods broken up. For example, in Halo 2, we're in the 9th Age of Reclamation. The previous chapter, Chapter 12, was the Second Age of Abandonment, describing the war that occurred between the Prophets and Elites before the formation of the Covenant.

Therefore, Chapter 12 occurred WAY before Halo. Were talking amazingly far in the past. Didn't you wonder why the Elites were using spears and daggers?

End of long rant.

The End of a War

Chapter 13

Fifth Age of Discovery

Fascinating. The collapsible frame allows the weapon to be discretely concealed whether strapped to an arm, or hidden within a suit of armor. It would be useless outside of arms reach, and the creators must have realized this, as they have made it capable of concealment, where the lack of a weapon would lull the enemy into a false sense of security.

The weapon in question sat upon a metal table, its surface a dull gray. Various tools were littered about, many of which appeared to have been cut in half. The Sangheili studying the device suddenly hefted it into his hands and activated a hidden switch by gripping the handle. With an exaggerated flourish, an intense energy spurted forth from the hilt where the Sangheili had a hold on it. The energy stopped its forward momentum half a foot away from the hilt.

Ido Naslum watched with unkempt rapture as the solid energy continued to exist in its state. The Sangheili, with emphasized care, moved from his perch before the table and walked to the far end of the room where a series of rocks sat on a table. Picking up one of the rocks, Naslum tossed it into the air and as it began to descend, swung the energy dagger swiftly. The rock continued to fall as if nothing had happened to it. Once it hit the ground, the stone split in two, the severed sides a perfect mirror sheen of each other.

"I see you have figured out what the new weapon is capable of," a voice spoke from behind Naslum. Turning, Naslum saw Field Marshal Romsunee handling one of the instruments he had sliced in two with the energy blade. Fumbling, he hit the release and the concentrated energy emerging from the hilt disappeared with a low hum.

"Marshal Romsunee, I didn't hear you come in," Naslum said by way of

greeting. He was wary of military personnel. They all seemed to look down upon him simply because he did not hold an actual rank.

"Enraptured with your work were you?" Romsunee asked wryly. He cast his eyes about, studying the room as if he expected Naslum to be holding some kind of contraband.

"Well, once you see what this new devise can do, I'm sure you'll understand why I may appear somewhat scattered at the moment."

Field Marshall Romsunee watched idly as Naslum activated the weapon, his eyes widening as he saw the concentrated energy spring to life. He followed Naslum's motions with the energy blade, enraptured. When Naslum activated the release, it was as if he had woken from a dream. The Sangheili officer shook his head slightly, forcing the cobwebs from his mind.

"Quite interesting," Romsunee said absently. "I have come however, for another task."

Naslum set the weapon on the table as he turned to look at the officer in anticipation.

"The Holy Prophet of Law has announced that work is nearing completion on the first line of carriers, modeled after the grand ships of the Forerunner."

"Excellent news," Naslum said, trying to keep the boredom from his voice. He wasn't very interested in the expanse of the military, but to show anything aside from complete devotion would be noted by Romsunee, and most likely passed on to the Lower Prophet that controlled their unit.

"Indeed," Romsunee nodded stiffly. "Since the fleet is almost ready for deployment, it has been decided that they will be deployed to the next likely planet that houses Forerunner technology."

That bit of news was somewhat puzzling to Naslum. The fleet had just been finished, and typically, that would mean a series of tests needed to be carried out to confirm that they would function properly. During the Lekgolo Taming, several uneasy battles had nearly been lost when the first prototype ships had torn themselves apart after repeated firing of the main plasma cannon. Naslum himself had observed some of the wreckages of the old prototypes.

> "So soon? Has any preliminary tests been done?" Naslum asked. Romsunee shrugged his shoulders and turned to walk out of the lab.<p>

"Your presence will be needed on one of the ships. The Prophet of Infinitude has ordered that as many scholars and scientists that we can spare to join the fleet."

"But my researchâ€¦" Naslum trailed off, seeing the intense gaze that Marshal Romsunee threw over his shoulder. "I will gather my things and report to the holy Prophet at once."

Romsunee continued exited the lab, throwing a parting comment of, "See that you do."

Military dog, Naslum fumed to himself. _Instead of analyzing Forerunner artifacts, they will have me go on a foolish search, with no direction aside from a senile Prophet who believes he can speak to the Gods. To think at one time the Sangheili had lived upon a planet rich in culture. Now we have been reduced to the Prophet's caretakers. Where are the great warriors of old? Is it because of my ancestry that I have been delegated to this degrading position?_

Gathering some of the still intact tools inside the lab, Naslum turned to leave. His gaze however, slipped back to the small device he had been fiddling with before. A quick glance about reassured him that no one else was around and the Sangheili moved back into the room, depositing the weapon into his robes.

With my luck, the Prophets will have found a new race they wish to assimilate into the Covenant, or maybe even more ruins they wish to worship.

* * *

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Ebusa Logi Forru watched contemptuously as the platoons of Unggoy and Kig-yar began boarding the flagship, _Conviction of Fealty_. _Ogada Logi Iobu, his bond brother, was behind Forru and he could feel the contempt his bond brother felt for the pathetic creatures. The two Lekgolo had been assigned to the _Conviction of Fealty_, as the ship was the craft that several high ranking Prophets and Sangheili would be traveling aboard. Forru and Iobu had fought the Covenant during the period they had come to refer to as the 'Red Sun'. When the sky had ceased being the source of wonder and life, and had turned into a sea of fire.

Forru had killed many Sangheili during that time, and he had earned the right to bear his Line's name. Such an honor had been tainted however, when the Lekgolo had been forced into submission by the Covenant fleet. Ground combat was what the Lekgolo excelled at, but orbital bombardments from their capital ships could not be defended against. Forru did not bear the Sangheili or the Prophets any ill will; in fact he was pleased over their decision to assimilate the Lekgolo into the Covenant. The Sangheili were worthy enemies, and the Prophets were messengers from the Gods that the Lekgolo had never known existed. The Forerunner had left behind a piece of their legacy on Forru's home world, and because of that they accepted the Prophet's offer to join their Holy cause. It was what came with the acceptance into the Covenant that Forru found troubling.

The caste system inside the Covenant was made of stone, an unbreakable agreement struck amongst all of the members. The Prophets served as the voice of the Gods, while the Sangheili were the body. The Lekgolo, Unggoy, and Kig-yar were simply tools, forced into conformity. The promise of a greater existence lightened the humiliation that the Lekgolo faced by being forced to fight alongside the pathetic beings.

The last group of Sangheili came aboard the craft, Forru and Iobu close behind them. The Sangheili warriors nodded respectfully at the two Lekgolo before moving on deeper into the ship. Forru motioned for Iobu to stop, as he had noticed two final Sangheili approaching. One

of them Forru recognized, he was one of the many Sangheili that had been given the title of experimenting with Forerunner technology, and then implementing it into the Covenant recreations. Normally only the Hunagok were granted permission to handle objects left behind by the Forerunner, but Sangheili that have the ability are given titles that allow them access. This Sangheili that Forru recognized had personally outfitted his armor with the weapon he now bore on his right flank.

For a Sangheili technician to be joining this fleet it must mean that we are heading to another planet that houses the Gods legacy. Would that I am able to see the glory of the Forerunner's power, I would be content. My bond brother and I are but tools however, and we will be used as such. The honor of seeing such a holy structure does not fall upon me, but the Sangheili and the Prophets.

* * *

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_Conviction of Fealty _broke free of Slip Space, the small split in space the ship created crackled angrily for a moment before closing. Ido Naslum shook slightly from the feeling of coming out of such a forceful tear. Everyone aboard had been forced into the lower holds once the ship had entered Slip Space. This was the first time a Covenant created vessel had ever attempted such a move, and despite the assurances by the Prophets that the ship was their gift from the Gods, there were feelings of apprehension amongst the crew.

Field Marshal Romsunee had instructed Naslum on his duties aboard the ship, then departed, leaving the Sangheili to ponder just what could be so important that the High Council would order the immediate departure of the first line of capital ships. Even the Grand Holy Prophet of Law had joined with the fleet, in the Forerunner ship, _Forgotten Legacy. _Such an action was highly unheard of, as the Grand Prophet of Law was the oldest and wisest amongst the Prophets. It was said that when he was but a Lower Prophet on the home world of the holy Prophets, that he had discovered the Forerunner legacy. Even one such as Naslum, who had doubts over the origins of the Forerunner could not disagree that the Grand Prophet of Law was a holy symbol of all that the Covenant stood for.

_Whatever our destination may be, I fear that battle and war will be necessary before the Prophet's true intentions are made clear, _Naslum thought to himself. His eyes moved back and forth over the rows of Sangheili who, now that the ship had exited Slip Space, were beginning to prepare their armor and weapons. Naslum found the plasma weapons to be distasteful, and didn't bother stepping forward to retrieve any. Ever since he had been young, Naslum had known he would never be a soldier; the whole prospect of fighting and dying for the Prophet's holy cause was not appealing to him. Many of those he had grown up and trained in the tribunals with had not shared that opinion and shunned Naslum for voicing them.

Shaking off the disorientation that seemed to befall him when _Conviction of Fealty _had exited Slip Space, Naslum moved out from the lower holds. Working his way through the many decks inside the ship, he eventually found his way to the bridge. It was with slight apprehension that the Sangheili scientist entered through the port side, and stopped just inside the doors. The bridge was a flurry of

activity, Sangheili worked frantically at halo-panels and tablets with a language Naslum recognized as the Forerunner's dialect scrolling across them. He was about to leave silently when a voice spoke up from the center of the bridge.

"It is a pleasure to see that the transition from Slip Space did not cause you any harm Naslum."

The Lower Prophet that had spoken to him was looking out at the many transmitters that showed what appeared to be some kind of orbital station in orbit around a planet. Naslum would not have thought that the Prophet had spoken to him if it weren't for the many cross glares the other Sangheili shot at him. For a Prophet to address a lower species by their given name was a grand honor, and one that was typically only bestowed upon those that participated in the High Council.

"I thank you for your concern, your holiness, this unworthy one does not deserve such treatment," Naslum replied, bowing his head slightly. His views on the Covenant and the Forerunner may have no followed those of the High Council, but he was still humbled by the Prophet's concern.

The Prophet seemed content with Naslum's response, and turned slightly, his hand motioning for Naslum to join him. The Prophet stood high on the bridge, it's hands molded to the bars fastened to the ledge. Aware of the hostile eyes upon him, Naslum climbed to where the Prophet stood and moved in beside him.

"Do you know what that is Sangheili?" the Prophet asked Naslum, pointing out towards the orbital station.

"This unworthy one does not, excellency," Naslum admitted humbly.

"I will enlighten you then," the Lower Prophet said. "When we found the Kig-yar home planet, the Forerunner installation upon their planet spoke to the High Prophet of Law, informing him that during our holy search we have come closer to discovering the true secrets of the Forerunner. The divine secrets of our ancestors informed him that there were a series of sacred ring worlds that would give us the answers to our inquiries. This installation," he indicated the orbital station, "may give us the answers to where we will find the sacred ring worlds."

"If you may grant this unworthy one to speak I must ask why is it that my brethren are preparing for battle in the lower holds. Has the installation been taken over by another species?"

The question may have seemed innocent to Naslum, but the Prophet turned and stared hard at him for a long moment. Finally he laughed lightly and turned back to the displays.

"The Gods must test those that seek the answers of time, Naslum, and we have seen in the past that many infidels have defiled the holy structures with their presence."

Why do I feel that remark was more aimed towards the Sangheili? Naslum asked himself, even as he nodded along with the Prophets words. His gaze returned to the orbital station, and as the ship grew closer he realized just how large it was. There were several docking

stations that he could make out, and it looked as if the Prophet intended to fit the _Conviction of Fealty _into one.

"You may return to the lower holds Naslum," the Prophet said. "Strike teams will disembark first, and I wish for you to be in the second wave. Any piece of the Forerunner technology you see you will record and make a document of. If it is possible retrieve a sample."

"At once, your holiness," Naslum said, bowing low once more before exiting the bridge and returning to the lower decks.

There is something inside of that station, and the Prophets know what it is.

* * *

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It was not often that Forru and his bond brother Iobu had ever felt fear. They had each faced thousands of battles before, and fought against implausible odds, always coming away the victor. There had not ever been reason to pause in battle for the two Lekgolo, not until the Sangheili and the Prophets had made the sky turn red, and let fire reign upon their planet. The emotion that had come from that battle shamed Forru and Iobu, and the two made a silent pact that they would never show pause when faced with an enemy.

That oath appeared to have broken however, for once they debarked from the ship into the docking station aboard the orbital structure, raw fear had lanced down through their bodies.

There was no enemy for them to fight though, and that angered the two bond brothers more than their shameful display did. The docking station itself reeked of old blood, and the platforms were stained a deep red, with patches of yellow. It appeared as if a battle had taken place not too long ago, but the Prophets had informed them that nothing had set foot in the station for thousands of years.

Attempting to rid himself of the fear that accosted him, Forru began to lumber forward with Iobu moving up beside him. One of the Sangheili commanders called out for them to cease their actions, but Forru ignored him and entered through an access way that lay near the end of the docking station. The corridors were wide enough to accommodate the Lekgolo pair, and they moved through with no hindrance.

_From what little I have learned about these space stations, the scholars have said that by conserving oxygen throughout the station, chemicals and bio forms are preserved in their natural state. Perhaps this is why the blood does not look too old, and why the reintroduction of oxygen has brought with it the odor of death, _Forru contemplated to himself. The corridor the two Lekgolo walked down ended with another sliding door that led into some kind of enclosure.

The architecture of the room was expertly designed. Asymmetrically built, hardened support columns and capsules with strange liquid inside filled the room. Forru moved forward, towards one of the capsules. Gazing intently at the strange liquid, he noticed there

were objects swimming inside. He had moved closer to the glass when Iobu grunted. Rising back up and turning, Forru followed Iobu's gestures at one of the support columns.

Forru approached what Iobu had indicated, and then he heard what must have caused Iobu's attention. A high pitched squishing noise was being omitted from behind the column. With a quick glance Forru began priming the weapon attached to his armor, as Iobu did the same. Forru kept his pacing slow and even, Iobu moved off to the other side of the column, prepared to flank whatever was waiting for the two Lekgolo.

When they had finally moved close enough to see what awaited them, both warriors paused. The creature was small, barely larger than Forru's head; and it was yellow. Its appearance seemed almost parasitic in nature.

As if noticing the two for the first time, the small parasitic form turned towards Forru and leapt at him. Reacting on his instinct, he raised his left arm and batted the creature away. Rather than bounce off the large shield Forru had used, the creature exploded with an audible popping noise. Yellow liquid splashed across Forru, and spores that appeared to have been inside the creature fell to the ground.

Forru and Iobu glanced at one another in confusion, just as more of the high squeaking noise was emitted. The two Lekgolo had only enough time to glance up at the ceiling before the parasitic forms were upon them.

* * *

>Ido Naslum was quite worried after departing from the Conviction of Fealty. The strike teams had gone ahead the moment the ship touched down inside the hanger, and the reports that were being sent back did very little to set the Sangheili's mind at ease.

Blood staining the walls and deck. No bodies accounting for the massive amounts of old blood, and a mysterious liquid that coated the decks and controls. It appears the Prophet was right. Some infidels did attempt to take over this station, but something inside murdered them. Who's to say we won't suffer the same fate?

As his feet hit the cool deck, Naslum noticed a pair of Lekgolo move off down one of the passage ways leading away from the docking station. One of the strike team commanders bellowed at them but for all appearances the Lekgolo seemed to have not heard him.

Hopefully whatever's lurking in this orbital station will attack the Lekgolo first. I'd rather have a little warning before some kind of demon attacks me.

"Come along Naslum, the Prophet gave you a task to complete, and you shall do so."

A sigh nearly escaped Naslum when he heard Romsunee speak from behind him.

"The strike teams have not cleared the station," Naslum pointed out, though he knew such a detail would not register with the Field

Marshal.

"This station has been abandoned for thousands of years," Romsunee said absently, moving off the docking bay and towards one of the access ways. "The Prophets have put their faith in us, and I will not let them be disappointed."

_How did our race go from such a proud civilization to the role of a tool for lesser beings? _Naslum asked himself rhetorically as he followed Romsunee deeper into the station.

* * *

>A cry of rage escaped Forru as he swung the massive shield molded to his left arm. Twenty of the parasitic creatures exploded, which set off a chain reaction. Hundreds of them popped and splashed the putrid liquid and spores around the room. The air was thick with the spores that the parasite were filled with, and Forru was certain he had breathed some of them in. <p>The parasites did not pose much a threat to the two Lekgolo. Their main form of attack was to simply jump at them, and try to attach themselves to the Lekgolo's neck. Several times the creatures had succeeded in their form of attack, but all they did was stab a long thin needle like plunger down, and then explode. Forru had barely felt the resulting damage, and quickly concluded that the parasite posed little threat to them.<p>

What they lacked in strength however, they made up for in numbers. After only an hour of battle the Lekgolo had destroyed countless parasites. Forru was certain his armor would be forever stained the thick yellow that it was now drenched in.

A heavy blast from the side confirmed that Iobu had just fired his weapon, and the ensuing destruction of the hundreds of parasites sounded next. Forru had misjudged however, and he breathed in a large quantity of the spores released after Iobu's attack.

Curse these parasites. My body is beginning to slow. It must be something to do with those spores.

Turning himself around, Forru nodded at Iobu and motioned to the door, signaling for them to retreat. Iobu seemed surprised for a moment, before he saw the labored breaths his bond brother was taking. With one final shot at the parasite he joined Forru in leaving through the passage they had taken to get there.

After running for only a short time, Forru's body felt as if it were on fire; his insides burned angrily with each step he took. By the time they reached the hanger his vision was blurred, and he could barely make out the ship sitting in the bay. The sudden wave of plasma that slammed into him however, he did notice.

A shout of outrage came from Iobu as Forru fell to the deck floor. His bond brother fired his weapon at the creatures that had opened fire, and a volley of plasma shots were fired at him in return. Forru heard Iobu fall beside him and he used his last bit of strength to crane his neck, so that his final vision would be of his bond brother.

* * *

>I have seen many Forerunner structures in the past, but this one is different. It appears to be some kind of laboratory. What were the Forerunner studying? Another organism?

Naslum found it hard to keep up with Field Marshall Romsunee's pace, as he kept stopping and staring in wonder at the many different devices and structures that were present in each room. As always, the station had a kind of perfect asymmetrical design, something Romsunee had come to expect from every Forerunner installation they came across.

With each step that took the two Sangheili deeper into the orbital station, they were encountering more and more of the laboratory styled rooms. Glass tubes filled with a strange liquid were abundant, and on closer inspection Naslum saw that some kind of organism was inside.

To have survived so many years without any kind of attendance, what kind of species could do such a thing?

His wonderings were interrupted when Romsunee spoke harshly for Naslum to hurry up. The scientist merely glanced back in irritation as he cast one final glance at the organisms. Romsunee had begun to get on his nerves with his incessant urgings.

The next set of doors took them into a much larger room, with hieroglyphic writings on the walls. Naslum ran his hands briefly across the symbols, his hand coming away in surprise when he felt a pulse of warmth come from them. A gentle throng of machinery moving echoed through the room and in the center of the room light sprang forth, and was molded into an image.

It was a moment before Naslum could make out the image, as the sudden influx of light had momentarily blinded him. When it did become clear however, he felt his body freeze, his heart nearly stopping from the shock. Romsunee was barely anymore coherent, but he had the state of mind to drop down onto his knees and bow low to the ground.

The image had molded itself into the figure of a creature. It's body was swathed in robes, and it was impossible for Naslum to make out what it looked like. There was little doubt however, that the figure he was staring at was a Forerunner.

Naslum took a hesitant step forward, and paused with surprise as the Forerunner's gaze seemed to follow him. Romsunee snarled out for Naslum to bow before the holy figure, but he couldn't.

"Holy one, you are indeed a Forerunner?" Romsunee asked, still bowed low to the ground, not even looking at the image. The Forerunner turned and looked at Romsunee and spoke. The words that came from it were incomprehensible to the two Sangheili, and the Forerunner seemed to notice that, as it paused. There was a moment of indecision between the Sangheili as they waited for the Forerunner to do something once more.

"Your language is styled after ours," the Forerunner commented, now speaking the language of the Covenant. Naslum and Romsunee were taken aback for a moment.

_Adaptive software must be inside this station. To only hear the

limited amounts of speech between the strike teams, and yet be able to formulate the remainder of our language is truly remarkable. What power they possessed, _Naslum thought to himself.

"Have the Flood been contained?" the Forerunner asked, his tone hard.

"The Flood, Holy one?" Romsunee responded in confusion. The Forerunner seemed to gaze inwards for a moment.

"You must flee this installation. Destroy it with your ships. There is an evil here that must not be released."

The response that been ready inside Romsunee's throat died when something fell from the ceiling and latched onto his neck. A shout of surprise came from the Sangheili warrior before he collapsed on the ground.

Naslum watched with horror as the creature plunged something into Romsunee's neck, and after a moment began to crush itself into the tiny hole it had made.

"Leave this place," the Forerunner said to Naslum, it's tone a direct contrast to what the Sangheili was staring at. "You have brought this upon yourselves, leave now or you will surely die."

The image of the Forerunner faded, and as it did so Naslum saw two more of the creatures that had attacked Romsunee appear from the ceiling and drop down. His mind screamed at him to run, but his body stayed frozen to the spot. He watched horrified as the creatures closed the gap between him and them. When one of them leaped towards him, he cried out with fear and batted the creature away, surprised to see it explode.

The remaining creature exploded as well, seemingly too close to the initial creatures destruction. Naslum let felt his body shudder once, as adrenalin burned within him. Before he could relax, he heard Romsunee groan.

Something had happened to the Sangheili's skin. It was becoming blotched with thick spores. His right arm suddenly ripped apart, and tentacles spilled out. What was once Romsunee climbed to it's feet and began charging towards Naslum.

Without any preamble, Naslum's hand went inside his clothes and was pulling the weapon he had brought from back in the laboratory in his home world free. With a quick flick the weapon was activated, and as the creature closed the distance between them and lashed out, Naslum plunged the weapon into it's chest. A shriek escaped the creature and it plummeted to the ground, crushing Naslum down with it.

Not wanting to wait for any more of the creatures to come, Naslum pushed the fallen creature off of him. He climbed to his feet and quickly moved towards the doors leading out of the chamber. Naslum had only taken a few steps when he felt movement behind him and was turning to look when he felt a heavy pressure slam into his back.

He was catapulted forwards, his body cracking roughly against the wall. A cry of pain escaped Naslum as he fell to the ground, his body immobile. Between painful gasps for air, he craned his neck to see

that the creature he had killed had indeed gotten back up to it's feet and attacked him. Before it could follow up the attack and finish him off, the creature exploded. Naslum watched in confusion as what was left of Romsunee's body splattered against the floor and walls.

Voices caught his attention, and Naslum attempted to look at the doors but he could not move.

"I'm afraid it seems two of the Sangheili made it this far into the station High Prophet of Law," one of the voices explained, and Naslum painfully noted that it was the Prophet that had been aboard the Conviction of Fealty. The response that the Prophet's comment garnered was garbled somewhat, and Naslum gathered that whoever was replying was doing so over a personal communicator.

"Yes, it seems they have encountered the parasite. One of the Sangheili was taken over by the parasite, and the other was attacked by it. I have destroyed the possessed Sangheili, what should I do to the other?" A pause followed while the person the Prophet was speaking to responded. "Yes, he is still alive. Injured, but alive."

Naslum tried to speak, to tell the Prophet that he had seen the Forerunner, but his voice would not come. He moaned with pain as his back shifted, just as the Prophet appeared in his vision. He was holding the energy blade that he used to attack Romsunee.

"I am sorry to do this Naslum, but you have seen far too much. Those who try to get too close to the Gods, will find that they have broken one of God's rules, and must be punished."

The energy blade was activated, and the Prophet shoved it into Naslum's chest, piercing his heart. The Sangheili had only enough time to open his mouth before the light left his eyes.

The Prophet stood up and cast his eyes to the center of the room.

"Yes, I believe they activated the station's defenses. Whatever spoke to them has been in this station for some time. Perhaps it was a Forerunner." Another pause. "Of course, that is foolish thinking. The strike teams have been neutralized, and the others aboard the ship have been eliminated. No one that saw the parasite shall make it back to the planet." A pause. "Understood. I will return to the ship and link up with the battle group."

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>Author's Notes: This chapter was more plot development than anything, giving us all a look at the fact that the Prophets knew of the Flood's existence before the discovery of the Halo's. Also, shows more treachery at the hands of the Prophets. <p>One more chapter left in this look into the Covenant's past, then were back into the main story. Thanks to everybody that's reviewed, you guys are awesome.<p>

****Author's Notes:** Just a quick note for now. Don't go castrating me over the way the Grunts/Unggoy are speaking in this chapter. Whenever they seem articulate (ie: actually able to speak in full sentences) they are speaking in their native language, not the mandated Covenant one. As a side note to those that are a little confused over things, I once again ask that you do what I suggested back in Chapter 12. Google the words, Halo Library and go to the first site in the list. There you will have all information that was available to me, that I have used to write this story.**

The End of a War

Chapter 14

The Age of Doubt

A monument to the Gods. An object of such magnificent beauty that those that look upon it would look away with shame, feeling that their mere gaze is a sin to such a work of beauty. Even those that felt the existence of a higher being was not possible could not look at such a structure and not be moved. A civilization so powerful that they could move the heavens themselves.

From the bridge of the Covenant flagship _Corinphi, _Gao Kinlumees watched with amazement as the Holy Ring sat before his cruiser. The sight was enough to move him to tears, but he held back. It would not do to show the crew such a weakness at a time like this. The Great Journey was in view, and all those who were worthy would be propelled along its sacred path. To join the ranks of the Sacred Forerunner, such an honor was one he would hold true to his being for all eternity.

"Commander," his executive officer, Niko 'Seporee spoke, "shall we proceed to the objective?"

It was a moment before Kinlumees could tear his gaze away and turn to the Sangheili.

"Of course, alert the rest of the fleet, and send word to the Prophet of Grief that we have arrived. I am certain he shall wish to see this before we land."

'Seporee walked off to go carry out Kinlumees's order and the Sangheili Commander returned his attention to what lay before his cruiser.

The Forerunner legacy. Our Holy Ancestors left this for us, and after thousands of years of searching, we have found it. This glorious structure shall catapult us towards our destiny.

The sound of the bridge entry opening drew Kinlumees's attention and he turned to see the Prophet of Grief entering the bridge.

"Holy one," Commander Kinlumees greeted, bowing his head slightly. "We have arrived at the destination."

"Halo," the Prophet of Grief said with splendor. "It is as the prophesy foretold." A mystical smile spread across his withered face. "You shall consider yourself lucky Commander, to be the first in millennia's to set eyes upon this glorious structure."

"I am humbled, Holy one," Kinlumee expressed as he turned back to the imposing structure that lay before his fleet. "Shall I give the order to land?"

"Yes," the Prophet of Grief nodded. "I shall send word back to the High Council, and inform them that we have accomplished our objective."

"Understood," Kinlumee said, and watched from the corner of his eyes as the Prophet exited the bridge. Once he had left the Sangheili Commander turned to the warrior at the helm of the ship. "Set a course for the Sacred Ring, and send word to the rest of the fleet to do the same."

"At once Commander."

What wonders await us on this sacred world? Kinlumee asked himself, as the _Corinphi _accelerated and headed towards Halo.

* * *

>"Recon the area, stay with your squad and if you spot anything alert the rest of the company," the Sangheili captain ordered. The group of Unggoy and Kig-yar muttered mindlessly to the Sangheili and seemed to not pay him much attention. When he turned and walked back to the dropship, the two assembled groups split up. The Unggoy heading off in one direction while the Kig-yar went the opposite way. Parting insults were thrown between the two groups before they had put enough distance between one another where they could no longer shout.
<p>Linglen stood upon a ridgeline and gazed out at the surrounding grassy knolls, wondering just what it is the Sangheili thought they would find here. This ring world was a big deal to the Prophets, and they had issued very direct orders that anyone seen defacing any part of the world would be sufficiently punished. There was little doubt in the Unggoy Commander's mind that the punishment would be torture at the hands of a Sangheili.<p>

The small creature turned to his squad mates and took a moment to gaze upon each of them.

_Gagaw, a seasoned Unggoy but a troublemaker. He has had more fighting experience than I have, yet I am in the position of commander for this squad. Does he resent me because of this? _Linglen asked himself. _Would I resent him if our situations were reversed?_

His gaze slipped onto the remaining two Unggoy.

Nasuli and Rowmep, the two greenhorns. Ripped away from their families on their home world, and sent for a cycle's worth of training before being shipped out to a fleet. They are about as dependable as the Kig-yar.

The red-armored Linglen sighed and stepped down from the ridge to stare down at his feet for a moment. His indecision over the start of their search was beginning to rub off on the rest of the squad, and Gagaw approached him.

"Something wrong Linglen?" he questioned in their native

tongue.

"No, I am thinking of a good place to start our search. It would not do to have the Kig-yar beat us in discovering whatever the Sangheili wish us to find."

The answer seemed to appease Gagaw as he moved away, heading towards Nasuli and Rowmep, and no doubt intending to play a trick on them. Linglen let his hand fall upon the Plasma Pistol attached to his waist.

I have never fired this weapon before, nor have I ever fired any weapon with the intent to kill what I was shooting at. Were we to discover an enemy on this world, would I be able to fight? Or shall I flee as the Sangheili and Kig-yar say we Unggoy are destined to do?

Linglen approached the rest of his squad and signaled for their attention.

"We are heading out for now, keep your eyes sharp."

Without another word, the others fell into line and Linglen moved out, assuming point and leading the squad down the incline. The vegetation of the area was abundant, trees and shrubbery covered the hillside. There was little in regards to indigenous animal life however, something Linglen attributed to the artificial creation of the world. While the creators of the sacred ring took painstaking care in constructing such an elaborate monument, they obviously had only intended for it to be a replica of artificial life, and not of natural creation.

The heavy methane build-up within the Unggoy home planet disrupted the growth and stability of vegetation, and as such, the ring world proved to be a stark contrast to what they had been raised on. They were nonetheless impressed with the beauty the world seemed to possess and flaunt with a subtle touch. There was an underlying sense of calm, which the Unggoy did not fail to detect.

Rolling green hills and large bunches of trees eventually tapered off into hard granite Earth. A far cave lay before a sprawling mountainside, and Linglen caught sight of it. Wordlessly he led the squad towards it. As they approached, Nasuli spoke up.

"When shall we rest Linglen? I'm tired of this senseless wandering."

Rowmep voiced his agreement, and a glance at Gagaw confirmed that he too was growing weary. Linglen stopped before the entrance of the cave and turned to face the squad.

"Alright, we'll rest here, but if a Sangheili comes by we shall hurry into the cave. I do not wish to find myself answering to our commander if they were to see us laying about," Linglen explained. As the squad collapsed and sat down, the Unggoy commander doubted, they had heard a word he said after the word 'rest' left his mouth. Though his body was worn from the long trek across the scenery, Linglen felt compelled to enter the cave. With a final casual glance at his squad, the Unggoy Commander stepped inside the large entrance to the cave.

* * *

>The novelty of finding, and stepping upon the Sacred Ring quickly wore off. Kinlumee felt the urge to rub his skull, feeling the onset of a headache as he stood before a large Forerunner structure. The building was much like the ones the Covenant had found upon inhabited worlds scattered around the many galaxies. <p>Covenant units had been deployed in nearly all areas of the Sacred Ring, and yet no word had been sent back expressing the discovery of the structure the Prophets had sent them in search of.<p>

_How is it that a structure larger than our entire fleet could somehow go unnoticed for nearly five hours now? _Kinlumee stressed to himself. _That we have come so close to the completion of our Great Journey, only now to have it delayed, could this be some kind of punishment from the Gods? A test perhaps? Why is it that the joy I felt when I first laid eyes on this place has been replaced with apprehension? As if my entire being wishes to be elsewhere._

The ground beneath Kinlumee's feet shook as the structure fired a pulse of energy into the sky.

"Inform the fleet that they must stay clear of these structures," Kinlumee ordered. The Sangheili behind him got on the battle net just as a pair of Sangheili warriors exited the structure. Kinlumee turned towards them. "What happened? Why did the structure fire?"

The two Sangheili glanced at one another for a moment.

"I do not know Captain, we had found a control panel, and when we activated our com channel the device lit up and animated," the Sangheili said.

Kinlumee felt the ground shudder as another shot was fired from the structure.

"Alright, return to the controls you discovered and attempt to shut it down," he ordered. The Sangheili bowed low to Kinlumee and hurried back into the structure.

"Captain!" the Sangheili he had previously ordered to contact the fleet had returned.

"What is it?" Kinlumee asked, inwardly hoping that nothing else had gone wrong.

"The _Corinphi _has analyzed the energy blasts from the structure." Kinlumee nodded for the Sangheili to continue. "They are harmless."

"Harmless?" Kinlumee questioned. "How so?"

"I am unsure, but one of the ships were hit, and the blast passed through it. The ship reported no damage was taken."

"How can that be?" Kinlumee asked, confused. The Sangheili made the motion to shrug but remembered he was speaking to a Fleet Commander and stopped himself.

"I do not know sir. It seems as well that there are structures like these all around the Sacred Ring and they have commenced this 'ghost' firing."

Without a word Kinlumee turned away from the Sangheili soldier and walked into the Forerunner structure. The silent halls echoed with his footsteps as he inwardly mused over the situation.

This structure has a secret. That it held the activation of the entire series of buildings around the Sacred Ring is no mere coincidence. What have the Gods hidden here?

He entered the chamber where the two Sangheili soldiers were hesitantly working at a control panel. When they spotted Kinlumee they stopped and approached him.

"I apologize for our incompetence Captain, but we cannot undue what our ineptitude has caused," one of the warriors said, his head bowed low.

"It is of little consequence," Kinlumee said absently. "Your haste may prove to be a Godsend. Come with me for now, we must search this structure."

"At once Captain," the Sangheili soldiers replied simultaneously, falling into step behind Kinlumee as he continued through the other entranceway at the end of the chamber. Another corridor led into a narrow room. The ceiling was slanted in an arch as the walls seemed to almost be suffocating to the three Sangheili warriors.

"Keep your focus, there is something wrong, I can feel it," Kinlumee cautioned as the narrow hallway filtered out into another chamber. Situated in the center was a control panel, much like the one Kinlumee had found the two other Sangheili at. With hesitation the Sangheili Commander approached the controls. The characters the Forerunner used in their written language appeared on the console, and Kinlumee let his hand fall upon one of the characters.

With a hiss of released air pressure, the section of floor surrounding the controls broke away and began to slowly descend. Kinlumee turned and watched as the two other Sangheili warriors rushed to the now empty section of floor and stared down at him as he descended beneath the Forerunner structure.

What have I gotten myself into now?

The elevator descended deep within in the structure. Kinlumee lost track of how long he fell, until finally light entered his vision once more and he felt the elevator slow its descent. Coming to a stop, Kinlumee was now inside a large framework of catwalks, each leading towards a central dome situated in the center of the room. The scale of the entire lower hold of the Forerunner structure was mesmerizing. The grand chambers and intricately designed corridors paled in comparison to what the Sangheili now looked at.

His feet carried him forward down one of the many catwalks, his pace even and calm, despite the excitement building within him. A glance over the side showed Kinlumee that if he were to fall, it would be a long time before he touched the ground again. The deep chasm stretched far below where his eyes could pierce, and for a moment he

felt trepidation.

The catwalk soon led him into the large chamber, and once inside, he stood back and watched with amazement as the chamber lit up. The room was enormous, and at once Kinlumee thought back to the ancient text he had studied while within the academy, telling of the Forerunner structures that would lead the Covenant to the completion of the Great Journey. He knew what it was that he had found.

The control center. The stepping-stone to the Great Journey. I have found our salvation.

His legs propelled him forward once again, and it was only a moment before Kinlumee stood in front of the control panel. He stared in wonder for a moment, then let his hands graze over the controls.

At his touch, the controls sprung to life. Ancient Forerunner text was projected in the air and solidified, making Kinlumee eager to touch them. He did so, but before he could touch another icon, the control panel powered down and became dark. The Sangheili stared in confusion until he heard a voice behind you.

"Oh I had wished I would get here before you did that."

Kinlumee spun around, his hand flying to his side, grasping the Plasma Rifle, and bringing about. He was taken aback for a moment, as in the area where the voice had originated there floated an orb-like device, with pulsing lights.

"Who are you?" the Sangheili Commander asked tightly, his grip not loosening on the Plasma Rifle.

"I am the first. Atoning Deviant. I am the monitor for Installation 01, and I am afraid you are in violation of the protocols in place for containment."

"What do you mean?" Kinlumee asked, his confusion growing, but the grip on his rifle loosening somewhat.

"This structure was given the properties of releasing the Flood, but only so that they would be taken off of life support. Once the installations have been activated they would slowly perish without nourishment. Unfortunately it was only at a time that a Reclaimer had come into possession of the Index that such an action would have been warranted."

The glowing orb moved off to the side and began accessing the control panel Kinlumee had just been using.

"Oh dear, it seems that it is too late, they have been released," Atoning Deviant said, its voice sounding almost pathetically disappointed.

"What do you mean, they have been released?" Kinlumee asked, alarms going off in his head. Releasing something contained within the Sacred Ring would surely not be a good thing.

"Why the Flood of course. They were my creators," Atoning Deviant paused for a moment, as if searching for the right word.

"Experiments, if you would. Unfortunately they were far too

resourceful than my creators had perceived, and they were contained within these installations so that they could be studied and further analyzed."

"The Holy Forerunners? They are your creators?"

"I was constructed at the beginning of the construction of the installations, so that I might perceive the integrity and situations that were the reason they were built. It has been a long while since anyone has set foot upon this Installation, and I had wished that the ones to do so would be the Reclaimers, but it would seem that your kind has beaten them to it. Because of your ignorance however, the Flood have been released, and now this installation must be activated. Protocol must be followed."

"I do not understand, you are the Holy Oracle are you naught? One of the many sages our Lords left behind to instruct us on the Great Journey?" Kinlumee questioned, his confusion giving rise to a sense of panic within him.

"Why do you use such terms?" Atoning Deviant asked. "I am the first of seven. I am the eldest, and therefore I am the first."

Kinlumee set the Plasma Rifle back onto his waist, fastening it tight as he stared at Atoning Deviant for a moment.

"I must take you to speak with the High Prophets. They will wish to ask you many things Oracle," Kinlumee explained as he beckoned Atoning Deviant to follow him.

"I am afraid you do not understand the protocols. This installation must be activated. A Reclaimer needs to be found, and I will need to instruct him on the containment situation. I have no use for your kind."

"Holy Oracle," Kinlumee persisted. "The Prophets are wise, and they will surely know of where you will find this Reclaimer, please come with me so that we may speak with them. I assure you they will know of what you seek."

"I have studied these creatures you call the 'Prophets' and they did not seem to be very wise, but perhaps I was mistaken. I shall take us to your ships, so that they might tell me where to find the Reclaimer."

"Of course, follow me and we willâ€¦"

Kinlumee was caught off when he felt his body suddenly warm. His surroundings began to shift, and he felt his entire being change. It was only a moment before his entire subconscious blossomed for a moment, then everything went black.

* * *

>I am starting to think that indulging my curiosity was a grave mistake.

Linglen stopped before another set of massive doors as they slowly hissed open and granted him entrance to another room.

It had only taken a few minutes of walking before the cave he entered had changed. Rocky walls and floors had changed to a metallic surface, and artificial lights lit up the grand corridors. The Unggoy quickly realized that he had discovered a Forerunner structure, and the Sangheili would most likely want to be alerted as soon as possible. Linglen decided against leaving however. Surely the Sangheili would come reconnoiter the area and see the rest of his squad.

The Unggoy were not often allowed access to Forerunner structures, and as such this was the first time Linglen had ever been so deep inside one. Even as he mentally noted the methane levels in his reserve tank were running low, the Unggoy Commander continued onward through the facility.

If I am to travel any further into this structure I may find myself incapable of replenishing my methane tank. As much as this structure amazes me, I do not wish to die here.

He turned to leave, when a loud hissing noise caught his attention. The room he was in had been different than the others he had previously occupied. There were many separate doors that led into other rooms, and he had just been about to enter one when he realized that his methane reserves were running low.

The hissing noise continued, and the lights within the room suddenly dimmed. Linglen waited in confusion for a moment, and then his eyes lit up in surprise when all the remaining doors within the room suddenly opened.

A pervading noise caught his attention once the hissing disappeared. It was a sloshing sound, and he could not place its origin. It seemed as if it was all around him.

Movement in the far corner of the room caught Linglen's attention and he moved forward to get a closer look. The lights suddenly returned, and Linglen was frozen in his tracks. There, moving just beside one of the many pillars in the chamber, was some kind of creature. It was small, moving on individual tentacles. Linglen could not perceive any kind of face on the creature, but it turned to face him all the same.

Terror flooded the Unggoy for a moment and he turned to flee, only to see that the doors that had been opened were holding even more of the creatures. Hundreds of them flooded out of the adjoining rooms, and Linglen was their destination.

The urge to flee was overwhelming, but the Unggoy pushed it down, knowing that running would only make him run headlong into the creatures. He steeled himself, reached down to his side, and pulled the Plasma Pistol free. With his free hand coming around to steady the weapon, Linglen began firing concentrated waves of plasma into the hordes of creatures.

His shots had more of an affect than he thought they would have, as the creatures seemed to be hyper sensitive, and when one was destroyed, several others nearby would be ripped apart as well, setting off a chain reaction.

Even with this new development, Linglen knew his ammo was about to

run out shortly, and he would subsequently be overwhelmed by the superior numbers of the creatures.

Pain washed over Linglen's arm and he looked down in surprise at the overheating Plasma Pistol. His gaze moved up to the approaching creatures and he stared back with futility.

I will not cower before them. I will meet my death with honor.

A line of the creatures suddenly leapt towards him, and began to descend upon the Unggoy squad leader. Before they could reach him however, a wave of plasma slammed into them.

Linglen watched with confusion as the rows of creatures in front of him were destroyed by wave after wave of plasma.

"Commander!"

The voice belonged to Gagaw, and Linglen turned to see the rest of his squad standing in the doorway of the entrance to the room. They were firing upon the creatures with intensity, even as some of the creatures changed trajectory and were now heading towards them.

With the distraction by the rest of his squad, Linglen was able to move from the end of the room to where his squad waited for him.

"It was not wise to go off on your own Linglen," Gagaw said as Linglen fought to catch his breath. "We searched a great deal for you."

"Thank you," was all Linglen could say as he struggled for his breath. His methane mask wheezed with each breath.

"I have alerted the company of our location, Commander," Nasuli said as he reloaded his Needler. Linglen nodded in response.

"We had best get out of here for now. This is not the only room that held these vermin," Gagaw informed him. Linglen nodded once more, his attention diverted from the creatures for a moment.

Together the squad fired one last volley into the room before hightailing it back through the many twisting hallways and chambers. Gagaw's warning proved to be correct, when they shortly encountered another group of the creatures. With their combined fire the Unggoy squad managed to hold them off, and made it through several more rooms before they were stopped by more of the creatures.

Linglen was fighting for his breath, as the rest of the squad fought.

I have endangered my team, and because of that they will die here, Linglen thought as he took one final breath, only to receive no methane from the mask on his face. Without a sound the Unggoy crumpled to the ground, his arms weakly trying to paw at the air, as if he could somehow grasp whatever it was he needed.

"Linglen!" Gagaw called out, seeing his commander fall. His diverted attention allowed one of the creatures to get through, and it leapt upon him, stabbing a pincer-like needle into his chest.

It was only a moment before Nasuli and Rowmep were overwhelmed.

* * *

>Kinlumee nearly cried out with surprise when his vision suddenly returned, and shortly thereafter his body seemed to reappear around him. The disorientation brought on by whatever the Oracle had done quickly passed, and he glanced around. <p>He was standing inside the council chamber aboard the Corinphi, andby the surprised stares he was getting from the other Sangheili and some of the lower Prophets, they must have had the same amount of warning as he had. His attention was diverted when he heard the familiar hum of the Oracle. It was directly beside him, and now was staring at the collected groups of Sangheili and Prophets.

"Will you show me where these wise Prophets, who can tell me where to find a Reclaimer are?" Atoning Deviant requested to Kinlumee. The Sangheili Commander was shortly confused for a moment, before he remembered his previous conversation with the oracle. He was about to speak up when another voice caught his attention.

"What are you doing here Commander Kinlumee? Your last transmission had placed you inside the Forerunner structure on the Sacred Ring," the Prophet of Grief said. "What is this creature you are with?"

Again Kinlumee opened his mouth to speak but was cut off once more.

"That, Prophet of Grief, is the Oracle of the Sacred Ring."

The new speaker was another Prophet, and it was one Kinlumee did not recognize. Judging by its appearance though, the Prophet was not of the High Council, as he was young.

"Will this creature be able to tell me where a Reclaimer is?" Atoning Deviant asked again. The Prophet that had spoken gazed over at the Oracle.

"I am the Prophet of Truth, protÃ©gÃ© of the Grand Prophet of Law. Holy Oracle, I am the one you seek."

Kinlumee felt his eyes bulge when he heard the Prophet's words. The Prophet of Truth was rumored to be the next leader of the Covenant, and was being personally educated by the Grand High Prophet of Law. For him to bestow his presence aboard Kinlumee's ship was a great honor.

"You are not a Reclaimer, and unless you can tell me where to find one, I have no use for you. The Flood have been released, and this Installation must be activated at once," Atoning Deviant spoke.

Many of the Sangheili and Lower Prophets in the chamber were taken aback by the Oracle's words, as they were not used to hearing anyone speak with such disregard to a High Prophet before.

"The Parasite have been released?" the Prophet of Truth asked, his voice tight, either from the Oracle's words or from the insult he had received.

"Yes, and I have recorded documentation of your kind being taken by them," Atoning Deviant explained. Without another word the Oracle moved to a set of controls along the wall of the chamber and activated them. Several screens appeared, and a recorded video was shown.

On the screens several Unggoy were fighting inside a Forerunner structure, against several small unidentifiable creatures. They were holding their own for a moment before the creatures eventually overwhelmed them. The scene then shifted to several pairs of Lekgolo. They put up a far greater fight than the Unggoy, but they too eventually fell to the creature's onslaught inside one of the Forerunner structures. Gasps and cries of outrage came from the assembled Sangheili and Prophets. The Prophet of Truth and Grief watched with grim faces as the recordings played, and Kinlumee merely watched in shock.

Suddenly the recording faded, and the Oracle floated back to the middle of the chamber.

"If a Reclaimer is not found, and the Installation activated, then you shall all be destroyed. Because of this creature," Atoning Deviant said, indicating Kinlumee, "and your ignorance the Flood have been released. I would recommend taking your primitive ships and fleeing for now. When a Reclaimer is found then you shall be eliminated along with the rest of the life in these galaxies."

Without another word, Atoning Deviant activated some kind of hidden grid and disappeared.

Shocked silence filled the chamber, many of the occupant's eyes falling on Kinlumee. The Prophet of Truth in particular was staring at him, his gaze tight with thinly veiled reproach.

"Tell me, Commander, is what the Holy Oracle said true? Did you release the Parasite?" the Prophet of Truth asked, his tone dangerous. Kinlumee fought to keep himself from swallowing.

"I inadvertently did so, holy one, but it was without prior knowledge that I committed such an act," he explained, hoping his voice was calm.

"The Parasite are a very affront to the Gods themselves, and they were imprisoned on the Sacred Ring by the Forerunner," the Prophet of Truth said. "By releasing them you have disobeyed the Forerunner themselves."

"That was not my intention," Kinlumee said, his voice weak. "I would never act out against the Forerunner in any manner. If I had known that what I was doing would cause such an event I would have stayed my hand."

"I believe that you would," the Prophet of Truth said, surprising Kinlumee. "You are an honorable commander Kinlumee, and you have served the Covenant faithfully for many years. I will speak with you in a moment, please await me in your private quarters."

With no response ready, Kinlumee bowed low and exited the council chamber. He kept his pace even and relaxed, not wanting anyone to

detect that he was anxious. Whatever the Prophet of Truth wished to speak with him about, Kinlumees knew it would not be good. His desire to please the Gods was all that kept him from delaying the trip to his quarters. He would have rather returned to the bridge, and assumed command, but to go against a High Prophets order would be heresy. An act guaranteeing him a quick death.

What have I done? By releasing the Parasite, I have delayed the Great Journey and put its completion in jeopardy. Shame is all that awaits me now.

Stewing over his thoughts, Kinlumees reached his chamber and awaited the Prophet of Truth. Thankfully, for Kinlumees, the High Prophet did not keep him waiting long.

"I have spoken with the Prophet of Grief, and he and I have reached a consensus," the Prophet of Truth said as the doors to Kinlumees's private quarters closed behind him. "The release of the Parasite was an error in judgment on your part, and it has adversely affected the Great Journey. Your lapse in judgment shall surely cause the Covenant great strife in the future. This error however, was not entirely your fault. The Prophets as a whole are not always indulgent of some of the finer details about the Forerunner legacy, and because of that we may have let the Sangheili make mistakes in the past. This is an error on our part as well."

Kinlumees felt his body relax slightly at the Prophets words. He might not be entirely blamed for this mess after all.

"The Oracle's speech has confused us however. In none of the ancient texts that the Forerunner left behind has there ever been mention of a Reclaimer. The necessity for one to complete the Oracle's tasks is troubling, and we must now dedicate ourselves to figuring out the intent behind the Oracle's words."

"I shall lend my assistance as much as possible to that task," Kinlumees said. He was taken aback when the Prophet shook his head.

"No Commander, you shall not," the Prophet explained, as Kinlumees felt his body tense. "While the release of the Parasite was not fully your fault, the burden of your actions shall fall upon your shoulders, and forever be carried by you and your line."

"But I did not intend to affront the Gods," Kinlumees protested weakly, even as he knew what the Prophet would say.

"Be that as it may, it was you who released the Parasite, and no other. You must take responsibility for your actions, and as of this moment, your actions have affected the Great Journey. Shame and humiliation is all that awaits you now, perhaps even torture at the hands of your brethren. I can offer you no solace, aside from the fact that you may make things easier on yourself."

"How might I do that, holy one?" Kinlumees asked. His body felt weak, as if he were to convulse any moment.

"There is always an honorable way out of all situations commander," the Prophet of Truth said, his gaze slipping down to the Plasma Rifle attached to Kinlumees's waist. "As a seasoned commander, I am sure you

will take the path of the warrior."

The Prophet of Truth stared at Kinlumees for a long moment before wordlessly turned and leaving the private quarters. Kinlumees fell back, and sat upon his bedding. His hands came up and cradled his face as he began to slowly weep.

I have shamed my family and my ancestors. When the Great Journey is complete, I shall be left behind.

Kinlumees hands left his face, and went to the Plasma Rifle at his side. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he got to his feet and turned to stare out the small window along the wall. Outside laid the landscape of the Sacred Ring, and for a moment, Kinlumees concentrated on that, even as he brought the Plasma Rifle up under his chin. Taking a deep breath, his eyes fell shut as the trigger was pressed.

The lifeless body of Gao Kinlumees slumped to the ground. The Plasma Rifle fell from his grasp and clattered to the ground, the only sound within his quarters.

* * *

>The Prophet of Truth returned to Kinlumees quarters several hours after he had previously left. He took notice of the Sangheili's lifeless body, and the quantity of blood staining the ground. After he checked to make sure Kinlumees was dead, he reached into his robes and extracted a small orb. <p>Activating it, a display was projected and the image of another Prophet, this one far greater aged than Truth, appeared.<p>

"It is done, the fleet commander took his own life," the Prophet of Truth said.

"Good," came the raspy voice from the image. "Ensure that anyone he might have spoken with is put to death as well. The ships that have touched Halo must be destroyed before the Parasite has a chance to escape. Have the Kig-yar, Unggoy, and Lekgolo that are still on the ships eliminated. The Sangheili that remain shall be instructed of Kinlumees treachery and betrayal. Do not speak of the Parasite."

"Understood," the Prophet of Truth said. "What of the fleet commander's family, their line has proven troublesome in the past."

"Do away with his mate, but leave his child be. We may have a use for him later on."

The Prophet of Truth nodded. "All right. Shall we be abandoning Halo for now?"

"Yes, this has resulted in a failure, but we have the location of the other installation, and we will 'discover' it when the time is right. For now we will direct the rest of the Covenant to the annihilation of the humans."

"I shall return once all this has been taken care of," the Prophet of Truth acknowledged, deactivating the orb and returning it to his

robes. He cast one final glance at Kinlumee's body before exiting the room once more.

* * *

>Author's Notes: Sorry for the delay everyone. Far too many delays occurred, but now things are somewhat back to normal. <p>Just a few notes in regards to this chapter. It marks the end in my introspective look into the Covenant's past, and Chapter 15 will resume the action with our favorite characters.<p>

As for Kinlumee, all I can say in regards to what happened with him is, ****_Like father, like son_****.

Thanks to everybody that has been reading so far, and a special thanks to everybody that's reviewed.

16. The End of a War Chapter 15

****Author's Notes: Well, here we are. Chapter 15. The Return of the Chief. To tell you the truth I was somewhat tempted to put that as the chapter title, but in the end common sense prevailed.****

****The look into the Covenant history was certainly nice, I know I enjoyed it, despite it being somewhat hard to write. There were some errors, grammatical and otherwise (latchkeyprincess pointed out one of the bigger ones in Chapter 14; boy was my face red when I read that), but overall it was a success.****

****Anyways this new chapter should be a welcome addition to those that found the Covenant history chapters somewhat unfulfilling. I've tried to include as much Chief and Arbiter goodness as possible in this chapter, which explains its large size. ****

The End of a War

Chapter 15

Nobody Ever Said Doing Hard Time Was Easy

Silence deafened those inside the room once the Arbiter ceased speaking. For hours he had led the occupants through the creation of the Covenant, to the final moments from when he had ceased to be a part of it. There had been no sound from any of the Section III officials, or the Admirals that were seated around the room while the Arbiter spoke. Commander Miranda Keyes and Spartan -117 had stood beside the Elite the entire time, listening as well as gauging the reactions of those the Arbiter was speaking to. Though the ONI officers had tried to keep their faces impassive several of them had shown shock over some of the details that the Arbiter provided.

The Master Chief felt the urge to move his legs, as he had been standing motionless for hours, but he kept himself rooted to the ground. He did not wish to draw attention to himself by being the first person to break the silence that had descended upon them all.

While the Master Chief had kept his entire body motionless throughout the proceeding speech by the Arbiter, he had listened intently to the

words of the Elite. The Arbiter stood silent, his head bowed low, not out of fealty, but because of exhaustion. The reminiscing upon the history of his race, and the betrayal by those that he had served with dedication had left him emotionally drained.

_And I cannot blame him for that, _John thought. _Betrayed by their spiritual leaders, and cast aside as if their years of service meant nothing. That the Arbiter was able to speak of it, so soon after it transpired is amazing. Would I feel the same if it came to be that I was betrayed by humanity?_

_The Elites have been our enemies for a long time, and I have hated them with all my being, but now that anger has dimmed. While I do not feel sympathy for their plight, I do understand what they must be going through. _

Movement caught the Master Chief's attention, and he returned his focus to the room, expecting to see some of the Section III admirals moving about. Instead it was the Arbiter that had moved. The Elite had dropped down to one knee, and had fixed his eyes upon the ground.

"I have complied with your wishes, and if you still see fit that there must be retribution, than allow the burden to fall upon me, for I shall gladly give my life to make amends for the crimes my brethren and I have exacted upon you. I ask only that you delay my death, so that the revenge the Sangheili must have on the Brutes and the Prophets is followed. Upon the death of those that must be murdered, I shall return here, so that my execution can be carried out."

_Trading his life so that the others would be spared. An act of selflessness, and one that I did not think the Elites would be capable of, _John mused. _Why is that? Did my vengefulness and single-minded killings keep me in the dark over what the Elites were truly like? I have seen them in thousands of battles, and yet I do not understand them at all. _

The Arbiter knelt silently, his body still as the Section III admirals watched him in silence, no doubt stewing over many of the same things that were running through the Master Chief's head.

Commander Miranda Keyes stepped forward, and rested her hand lightly upon the Arbiter's shoulder. The Elite glanced upwards at her, but her attention was directed at the Admiralty.

"As you heard, the Elites have been betrayed. Yes they have participated in unholy atrocities but they were deceived. Led to believe that we were affronts to their Gods. We can bring them to justice after this war is over," Miranda said. A snort came from one of the Section III officials.

"That's all fine and well Commander, but have you forgotten what the public will think about this? Forgiving the aliens that have been trying for decades to wipe us off the face of the universe. I hardly think that will go over well with all that's left of our kind."

"Turning public opinion in our favor isn't going to do anything about

keeping the human race from extinction Colonel," Miranda warned. "Setting up an alliance with the Elites could help keep us alive, and maybe even turn the tide against the Covenant."

The Colonel that had spoken previously slammed his fist down onto the table.

"The Covenant have been dealt with!" he shouted. His hand rose and pointed at the Master Chief. "That cybernetic freak took care of the rest of their fleet, and we have time now to rebuild the MAC stations and the fleet. Whenever the Covenant come limping back we'll be ready and waiting for them."

"With what?" Keyes asked scathingly. "I don't know if you could see it all the way down here in this bunker Colonel, but our fleet was nearly decimated up there. If not for the Master Chief stopping the Prophet of Truth, and then disabling the rest of the Covenant fleet, our outer defenses would have fallen. We'd be engaging Covenant forces groundside as we speak."

Keyes removed her hand from the Arbiter's shoulder and moved closer to the official she was speaking to.

"We have a bigger problem than just the Covenant now. The Forerunners built something on Earth, a facility capable of remote activating every Halo Installation. That's the Covenant's intended target, and we're sitting right on top of it. They've been blinded by their fanatical devotion to the Forerunners that they've ignored Halo's main purpose. If they manage to activate the Ark, all sentient life, all life of Earth, is going to be wiped out."

The Colonel sat back in a huff, but seemed as if he had been mollified.

"I am aware of the report that Cortana and yourself furnished Commander," he retorted softly.

"Then you know that organizing an alliance with the excommunicated members of the Covenant would be in our best interests," Commander Keyes said.

The Colonel remained silent, but Admiral Cortez spoke up.

"I agree with Commander Keyes about the direness of our situation, but I cannot grasp the thought that the Forerunner built a structure somewhere on our planet, and that we have somehow never discovered it."

"How sure can we be that the Forerunner actually built the Ark on our planet?" one of the other admirals asked.

"The monitor, Guilty Spark, gave me the coordinates of the location, and I cross referenced them. There is no doubt in my mind that they lead straight to Earth," Keyes explained.

"There is obviously many things that we need to deliberate on for now," Admiral Cortez announced, then turned to the Master Chief. "Spartan -117, is there anything you would like to add?"

The Master Chief felt the many different sets of eyes fall upon

him.

"No sir," he said deeply.

"Alright then, Commander Keyes I request that you stay behind for now. The Master Chief will escort this Elite to the holding cell 7-C. After which a Marine detail will take over surveillance," Admiral Cortez ordered, then shifted his attention to the Arbiter. "While I believe you would not be foolish enough to try anything, the fact remains that you are still our enemy, and as such you need to be detained."

The Arbiter wordlessly got to his feet and nodded once to the Admiral before turning to John. The Spartan motioned his head towards the door.

"Lets go."

* * *

>Ugh, if I knew I'd be waiting this long, I would have tried to sneak down there with the Chief and Commander Keyes, Jan thought as she kicked lightly at the gravel beneath her feet.

It had been hours since the Master Chief and the Arbiter had entered the ONI base, and ever since Commander Keyes followed them shortly afterwards, she had been stuck waiting outside alone. The many Marines that were guarding the entrances to the base hadn't been very talkative, aside from sending a few cat calls her way. She'd thought about maybe teaching the few Marines that did so a lesson, but after the firm talking to from Commander Keyes that she should keep herself out of trouble, Jan decided to just ignore them.

Miranda Keyes had been a lot more sympathetic to Jan's plight than she had thought the UNSC Commander would be. After informing her about the plans Kevin and the others had come up with shortly before the Covenant invasion, granted with a lot of omitted facts, Keyes had become a great deal more hospitable.

With a sigh Jan slumped down onto the dusty road, and leaned her head against the outer wall of the ONI base.

I wonder how Gilly and Gladys are doing.

The sound of heavy footsteps crunching over gravel caught her attention, and Jan leapt to her feet when she saw the Master Chief emerge from the base. With a few quick strokes she brushed off the dust that had clung to her backside and then jogged over to the Spartan.

She was slightly disappointed when the Master Chief did nothing more than glance in her direction and then continue walking, but Jan quickly shrugged it off and caught up with him.

"So," she said, hoping the Spartan would start talking.

Guess not, Jan brooded. They walked in silence for a few more paces until Jan noticed they were heading towards a Warthog.

"Are we heading back to _Honor Without Mercy_?" she asked the Master

Chief as he climbed into the driver's seat. Jan demurely got in beside him. She watched, puzzled, as the Spartan stared at the steering wheel for a long moment.

"Why are you still following me?" the Master Chief asked suddenly, his gaze still directed away from her.

"What?" Jan replied, confused. The Spartan didn't reply and Jan slumped back into her seat.

"Iâ€¦I don't know. I told you I just wanted to help fight this war."

"Then you could have joined the UNSC," the Master Chief said.

"I already tried that, they turned me away because I'm too young," Jan shot back, her fear of being turned away by the Spartan slowly melting into anger.

"There's civilian defense programs. If the Covenant made it through the orbital defense grid then you would still get the chance to help," the Spartan pointed out as he finally turned to look at her.

Jan opened her mouth to fire back a retort but nothing came out.

The Master Chief breathed deeply before turning on the ignition for the Warthog.

"Go home to your family Jan."

Her mouth snapped shut as the Master Chief's words registered, and she clenched her fist tightly, feeling the sting of pain as her nails dug into her palms.

"I don't have a family to go back to," she said slowly. "My father was murdered, and my mother is too psychotic to give a damn about me. My friends are all too busy fighting this war on their own, and I thought being with you would give me the chance to do the same."

A silent sob wracked Jan's body for a moment, but she fought back to keep herself from crying in front of the Master Chief.

"I arranged to have a Pelican take you back to your city. The flight will be long, but with the Covenant out of commission for now you'll be safe," the Master Chief said. As Jan readied a retort he shifted gears on the Warthog and brought them out of the parking lot.

"Haven't you heard a word I've said?" Jan asked, chokingly. "I don't have a home to go back to, and even if I did I wouldn't want to go back. Can't you see that this is where I belong?"

"You're just a kid, you shouldn't have to fight and die in this war."

Jan felt her cheeks flush with anger, and she bit back the urge to lash out at the Spartan.

"I'm seventeen years old, and I bet I know more about life than you,"

she retorted. "I was born to be a soldier. This is what I was created to do."

The Master Chief's grip tightened on the steering wheel as he brought them out onto the main road.

"Nobody is born to be a soldier," the Spartan commented, before he realized the absurdity of such a statement. Jan watched him incredulously for a moment before shaking her head.

"My father was part of the Spartan I project, and so was my mother," she said softly. If not for the augmentations to his body, the Spartan would have missed her words. Even so, it took a moment before her statement fully clicked inside his mind. His foot came down on the brakes so fast he nearly slammed through the inner casing of the Warthog.

"What?" the Master Chief asked, his voice tight.

"My father," Jan said slowly. "Jim Lee, I think is the name he entered the program under. I don't know about my mom. They were both a part of the program. I'm not sure exactly what kind of training they went through, but I know they received some kind of augmentations to their bodies, and I inherited some of them."

The Master Chief stared at Jan for a few moments. What she said seemed incredulous, but it made at least some sense to the Spartan. Dr. Halsey had never mentioned anything about a Spartan I project, but if he and the others had all been Spartan II's then there would have had to been a first stage for the project. An experimental phase.

Jan kept her gaze down in her lap, unsure of what the Spartan would do now that she had told him that information. Would he turn her into ONI?

She felt the Warthog accelerate, and she lifted her head a little to see that the Master Chief was quickly putting them into a U-turn.

"Where are we going?" Jan asked, unsure if she should feel elated that the Spartan didn't seem to be still be intent on sending her away, or worried that he appeared to be heading back to the base.

"The HighCom Facility Hospital," the Spartan answered shortly.

"Um, I'm feeling rather fine actually, if you don't believe what I said that's okay, but I don't think you should have me committed," Jan said.

"That's not what we're doing Jan, I just want to visit some friends."

* * *

>The Prophet of Truth inwardly fumed as he sat aboard the bridge of the Forerunner ship. Hunagok and Jiralhanae worked tirelessly at the controls of the ship, trying to regain control of the navigation equipment.<p><p>

It had been countless hours since the inevitable discovery that the ship was heading on an uncharted course through Slip Space. No matter how hard they tried, the Covenant aboard the ship could neither control the ships course, nor could they figure out just where the ship was taking them.

After many hours of repeated failures, the Prophet of Truth was beginning to get annoyed.

This diversion is stalling the completion of my task. All communications are down, and I cannot contact the High Prophet and alert him to our predicament. This event could forestall the Great Journey, and may even cause my goal to be unreachable.

A lone Jiralhanae stepped away from his station and approached the Prophet of Truth.

"Holy one, we have yet to wrestle control back of the ship, but several of our navigators have made a discovery."

The Prophet of Truth stared down at the Jiralhanae.

"Enlighten me, warrior."

"Through several of the devices we brought aboard, it has been deciphered that we have completely exited the human's system, and are now heading towards an uncharted one."

"Allow me to see the relevant data," the Prophet of Truth ordered, and the Jiralhanae bowed low before trotting off to carry out his order.

_What course does this ship intend to take? _Truth asked himself as he watched the warrior return.

"Here you are, holy one."

The Prophet of Truth took the extended portable device and began scanning the characters that were scrolled across the screen, as well as the crude map configurations the navigators had devised. When he had read it all, the Prophet quickly read it again, making sure that what he saw was no illusion.

The device fell from his hands and clattered to the ground.

By the Gods, we are heading for the birth place of the Prophets!

* * *

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"Have you ever thought of removing your armor when you come to places like this?" Jan asked the Master Chief as they moved down the crowded hospital corridors. "I'm sure you wouldn't get so many stares."

John ignored Jan's comment as best he could as he scanned the room numbers. The intensive care unit was a maze of twisting hallways and intersecting rooms. A doctor had provided them with the information that the Spartan had asked for, but he was beginning to wish he had

accepted the offer to be shown straight to the room.

_G14, _John thought as he gazed at one of the rooms. _This is it._

Several Marines had been posted at the doors, and they snapped tight salutes to John, even as they eyed Jan wearily.

"At ease," John said, aware that his rank did not warrant the non-com's to salute him, and slightly embarrassed that they had done so. "Is it alright for me to go in?"

"Of course sir. The Doc was just inside and he said they'll be out for another couple days," one of the Marines informed him.

John nodded once and stepped by them, as the Marines subjected themselves to a retinal scan that opened the hospital room door. The Spartan stepped inside, and motioned for Jan to come with him. She did so, mindful of the curious gazes the Marine detail were giving her.

With Jan inside, the door slipped shut, and the Master Chief turned to look at the occupants of the room. He felt his heart nearly skip a beat when he did so.

They look as if they are waiting upon Death's doorstep, he thought to himself as he stepped closer to one of the beds. It wasn't until he had spotted the forms attached to the bed frame that he had realized he was looking at Will. The Spartan was so heavily bandaged that it was near impossible to tell who it was. The sheer number of tubes and needles running out from his body seemed impossible. A quick glance confirmed that both Fred and Linda were in the same shape as well.

The sound of a smothered gasp confirmed that Jan had seen the other occupants of the room. The three Spartans had been put under lock and key while they were recovering, and their Mjolnir armor was being kept nearby. While they may have been covered completely with bandages and other medical devices, it still felt odd seeing them without their Mjolnir gear on.

They lookedâ€¦weak.

"Are they going to be alright?" Jan asked quietly from where she was looking down at the unconscious body of Linda.

John fought the urge to let a sigh escape him as he moved over to where Fred lay.

"Commander Keyes let me in on what the doctors had to say, and right now it appears they will pull through," the Spartan said, letting his hand hover over Fred's, but not touching him. "It will be sometime before they'll be ready for combat however."

The Master Chief watched out of the corner of his eye as Jan reached out tentatively with her hand and let it touch Linda's face for a moment.

"Come with me," John said, startling Jan as she withdrew her hand. Without another word he walked to the door and opened it up, walking

through. Jan gave one final glance to the three Spartans and then raced out after him.

It wasn't until they were out of the hospital that John spoke up again.

"Do you still wish to come along with me?" he asked suddenly. Jan glanced at him in confusion for a moment, before catching his meaning. She shook her head for a moment before laughing.

"So that's why you took me to see those other Spartans. To show me what the price of fighting alongside you could be. I suppose I should have told you before, Master Chief, but I'm not so easy to shake loose," Jan said with a smirk, before turning serious for a moment. "You asked me before why I'm still fighting, do you mind if I ask why you're still fighting. Something tells me if you wanted to retire you would have done so already, and I doubt anyone would be able to stop you."

The Master Chief nearly stumbled slightly at her question.

Why do I still fight? I've been given everything in my life just to have this chance, to become the soldier that I am, I can't turn my back on all that.

Dr. Halsey's last few words to him suddenly came back to the Spartan.

I fight so that others can survive. I want to save as many people as I can.

John watched Jan for a moment before grunting. He led them back to the Warthog.

"Where to now sir?" Jan asked mockingly. Her spirits were somehow lifted once more.

"For now your going back to _Honor Without Mercy_, " John informed her. "Its probably the safest place on the planet for now, at least until the Admirals figure out what they'll be deciding is the best course for the planet right now."

Jan huffed for a moment, but then relaxed.

"Don't be too surprised if they start circling their wagons," she said as the Spartan started the engine.

John looked at her, as the term seemed unfamiliar to him, but his pride wouldn't let him ask for Jan to elaborate.

As he pulled out of the hospital and started down the road, John found himself looking inwards once again.

Once I drop her off, there's one other thing that I must take care of.

* * *

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The Arbiter readjusted himself as discretely as he could. The chair the Marines had provided him was too small and uncomfortable for him to use, but the Elite did not wish to give the guard detail any reason to train their weapons on him, so he suffered in silence.

_If our positions were switched, what would I do in this situation? _the Arbiter asked himself. _Taking humans into imprisonment was only for a short time, and they were tortured non-stop whilst it progressed. Once we obtained the relevant information, the detainee was disposed of as quickly as possible. Why am I expecting different treatment from the humans?_

Inwardly sighing, the Arbiter cast an indiscreet glance at the room he was being held in. The human Admirals had explained that it was an interrogation room, but from what the Arbiter could tell it was far different than the interrogation rooms that he had seen while serving with the Covenant.

The sound of the door opening came as a slight surprise to the Elite, as nobody had entered the room for several hours. Not since he had first been placed in the cell and a Marine detail had entered and taken up positions beside the only door in leading out of the room. The Elite's surprise grew when the Demon stepped into the room.

Salutes were snapped from the Marines, and the Demon returned them with uncertainty, telling the soldiers to take a break. Without a word the Marines left, leaving the Demon and the Arbiter alone.

"You should not be uncomfortable by the adoration given to you by the lesser humans, Demon," the Arbiter commented with a smirk. "They see you as a hero, just as the Covenant see you as an enemy."

"I suppose the same can be said of you then," the Demon replied. "As the Arbiter you are the hero of your people, but to humanity you are nothing but a murderer."

The Arbiter tried not to flinch, even as the Master Chief's remark struck deep within him.

"Have your commanders reached a decision?" the Arbiter asked, changing the subject. The Demon shook his head.

"They are still deliberating at the moment, but that's not why I came," the Demon said, taking the time to sit himself down in the chair opposite from where the Arbiter was sitting. "I have visited the remaining members of my unit."

The Arbiter looked back at the Demon, uncertain of where he was going with this.

"They are in critical, but stable position. During the assault on our orbital defenses, they were stationed in the adjacent MAC stations. The Covenant brought in a bomb, and detonated it. The doctors I spoke with briefly, explained to me that if it wasn't for the Mjolnir armor they would have perished along with the other soldiers and technicians aboard the station."

_Has he come to exact his revenge? _the Arbiter asked himself. Against his will a tendril of fear worked its way through his body at

the thought of being attacked by the warrior that sat across from him.

Surprising the Arbiter, the Demon's helmet suddenly emitted a loud hissing noise. With a smooth gesture, the Demon reached up and removed the helmet from his head. The helmet was placed on the table that separated the two warriors, and the Demon stared hard at the Arbiter.

"Even though I am enraged over the fate that my comrades have all met during the course of this war, I do not bear you, or any of your kind any ill will."

The Arbiter was confused for a moment, before he recalled what he had said to the Demon aboard Honor Without Mercy.

"Hatred is neither gathered, nor dispelled so easily, Demon," the Arbiter said, his earlier caution gone. "We were your enemy for many years, and fought each other countless times. No matter what you may believe, I can see it in your eyes, that your holding yourself back."

The Arbiter leaned forward across the table, cutting the distance between them in half.

"There's nothing that would bring you greater joy right now than leaping across this table and snapping my neck."

For a moment, the Arbiter feared he had pushed the Demon too far. The icy gaze in his eyes had changed momentarily to a smoldering glare, filled with malice. However, as quickly as his gaze changed, the look faded.

"Sit down," the Demon said calmly. For a moment the Arbiter stared back defiantly at the human, but eventually sat himself back down onto the chair. The Demon reached down and picked up his helmet, replacing it on top of his head.

"Cortana has tapped herself into the HighCom building, and she was listening in on the conversation between the Admirals. They are mainly speaking about the likelihood of civilian unrest if it happens to come to pass that we accept your offer, and combine our forces."

"That would seem like a likely outcome, but civilian unrest can be put down with force from the military," the Arbiter commented.

"They would not order such a thing," the Demon replied. "Civilians may not be soldiers, but they have rights, and to suppress them violently would be a violation of the UNSC Charter of Conduct. We have needed to be united against the Covenant, and to because of that a free world had to be established."

"A free world," the Arbiter echoed softly, letting out a short, bitter laugh.

"The Admirals will more than likely agree that we need to form an alliance with the Elites, and the other ex-members of the Covenant. When that time comes, I expect that you will request the use of

Honor Without Mercy to return to your home planet, and rally the remaining members of your race," the Demon said. The Arbiter was surprised for a moment, that the Demon had made such an astute observation.

"Yes, that would be my intention," the Arbiter replied. "The Covenant home planet has likely erupted into war, and I must return to the home planet of the Sangheili and alert my brethren."

The Demon nodded once.

"If it comes to pass that it occurs, I shall be accompanying you," he said simply, and watched as the Arbiter stared at him in shock. "You are surprised?"

The Arbiter quickly slipped his mind from the gridlock it had entered and stared at the Demon incredulously.

"What if the Covenant manage to pull another fleet together and attack this planet? Without your skill in battle, it would be near impossible for the rest of your forces to fend off the Covenant attack."

"The technicians at ONI have managed to outfit our battle cruisers with plasma cannons, much the same as those the Covenant battleships are equipped with. The difference is each of our ships have also been given the program developed by Cortana that improves upon the style of fire that your ships employed. When the Covenant finally return they will be given a much larger surprise than they received the last time," the Demon said smugly, before dropping his voice down to a serious tone. "Form whatever conclusions you may about my thoughts and intentions, but I do not wish to see anymore people suffer needlessly, and that includes your people, and the others."

The Demon looked as if he wished to stop speaking, but he forced himself to continue.

"I...I want to save as many people as I can. There has been too much sacrifice for this war, and I want it to end."

I did not expect this, the Arbiter admitted to himself as he watched the Demon from across the table. _His bloodthirsty hatred on the battlefield is only one facade of his real personality. The Covenant has once again misled us, believing him to be nothing more than a machine created by the humans as a mindless weapon to be used against us. _

On his own accord, the Arbiter stood from his chair and walked around the table to where the Demon sat. Without any compunctions, the Elite extended his hand towards the human. The Demon watched him for a few moments before getting to his feet and grasping the Arbiter's wrist, and pumped it once. The Arbiter couldn't help a smile from gracing his face as the Demon neglected to release his hand right away.

Surprising both warriors, the door to the interrogation room suddenly opened, and the two Marines stepped into the room. The Demon had quickly released the Arbiter's hand and stepped back, before the Marines had seen what the two were doing.

"Master Chief?" one of the Marines asked. "Admiral Cortez requests that you bring the Elite back to the council room."

The Demon nodded once, and turned to the Arbiter.

"Come with me."

_Will I be given a chance to redeem myself? _the Arbiter thought as he exited the room behind the Demon. _Or will I meet my death?_

* * *

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"Has our transportation been arranged?" the creature asked, aboard the Jiralhanae vessel. An orb-like object appeared, held in the grasp of a long tentacle. "Not at the moment. The sentinals are presently fixing the outer layers of the ships damaged in that scuffle. Several of the other ships have suffered almost seventy percent structural damage," the orb replied.

"Good, our journey is clear, and the course is set. We shall head for the destination in these creatures navigation devices, and the Reclaimer you seek shall be found."

"Oh how wonderful!" the orb proclaimed. "I grew worried when the Reclaimer left, but now that the Installation has been destroyed, we must head to the Ark and set off the other Installations."

"Yes, our goal is the Ark," the creature replied.

* * *

>Jan sighed to herself as she drummed her fingers on the table she was seated at. The Covenant designed to sit there must have been either the Elites or the Brutes, because the chairs and table were much larger than she was used to. Her feet dangled in the air, and her head just barely rested on the tabletop comfortably. As much as she hated to admit it, Jan was bored.<p><p>

The newly excommunicated Covenant members may not have been openly hostile, but they certainly weren't friendly. After being cheerfully forced back on the ship by the Master Chief, she had been purposely ignored by everything and everyone aboard.

Maybe I should have taken the Chief up on his offer, and gone back to see Gilly and Gladys. At least I'd have somebody to talk to.

With another exaggerated sigh she slumped back in the chair, ruefully noting that the chair she was situated on must have been bolted to the ground, and provided no alternative directions to turn the chair in.

"Most people would enjoy a lull in the action around here," a female voice announced. Jan shot up in the chair, and searched for the owner of the unfamiliar voice. She was slightly disturbed when there appeared to be no one around her.

"Um, hello?" Jan called, raising her voice slightly.

"Right here," the voice said, and with a slight flurry of activity, the pedestal situated on the table became alight, and in a moment the small figure of a woman was standing before Jan.

This must be the Smart A.I that travels around with the Master Chief, Jan thought, recalling something Commander Keyes had said to her.

"Uh, hi, I'm Jannisary James, but you can call me Jan," she said by way of introduction.

"I know," the A.I said simply, her voice smug. "You are seventeen years old. Lived with your father for most of your life, moving from city to city, trying to avoid the ONI personel that thought you would make a good Spartan 2.0 candidate. Nineteen days ago your father, James James, was shot three times and killed by a gangster by the name of Thin Kinkle, while he was trying to stage your rescue. You consequently escaped shortly thereafter, with the assistance of an unknown assailent. A week later, three unknown individuals broke into a warehouse that was a known headquarters for Thin Kinkle and another gangster by the name of Monster Ann. The body of Think Kinkle was discovered, along with the still living Monster Ann. Several of the men later arrested at the facility attested that the intruders were three females, but nobody could corroborate their claims. A few days later you applied for membership in the UNSC, but were turned down because you were underage."

"You do get around don't you," Jan responded lazily, though she was slightly disturbed that the A.I could have so much in-depth information on her.

"Given all that information, I would like to know just how you came to be following the Master Chief," the A.I said, and Jan knew an order when she heard one.

"Jealous are we?" Jan asked, grinning. The deadpan look she received from the A.I wiped the grin from her face. "Alright."

Half an hour passed and finally Jan had finished recanting each endeavour she had had with the Master Chief. The A.I seemed to want particular details, about what the Master Chief did during battle, and his interactions with others.

"So the Master Chief allowed you to come along with him on his mission to finish off the Covenant fleet?" the A.I asked, slightly incredulous.

"What can I say? Maybe he wanted company," Jan shrugged, then let a coy grin flash onto her face. "Plus, I'm very persuasive."

The A.I seemed to let the comment go without comment. Jan shifted on the chair as the A.I stared off into space for a moment.

"So how long have you been with the Chief?" Jan asked suddenly. The A.I stared at her, but did not answer. "I mean, have you been with him ever since he started fighting against the Covenant?"

"No," the A.I said slowly, after a long moment. "The Master Chief had many engagements with the Covenant before I joined with the

unit."

"Uh huh," Jan said nodding. "Was he as distant back then as he is now?"

"There are, many reasons the Master Chief is the way he is," the A.I said warily. Jan picked up on the hesitation.

"Oh don't worry, I know about the other Spartans. The Master Chief told me."

"He told you?" the A.I asked, her tone unconvinced. Jan nodded.

"Aboard the Cairo, while he was trying to talk me out of going along with him. Just a few hours ago he took me to go see the other three Spartans, the ones that were aboard the Malta and the Athens when the Covenant blew them up."

Jan nearly laughed at the silence that came from the A.I. From her interactions with Durga, she knew just how annoying Smart A.I's found it when people knew information that they did not, and the influx of info she had just thrown at the A.I must have ticked her off.

"How...interesting," the A.I said finally.

"Do you know if there's anybody else aboard this ship that's human?" Jan asked. "I'd feel a little better knowing I'm not the only one."

"Sergeant Johnson is about to undergo surgery in the medical bay," the A.I said. "If you'd like to go watch your welcome to."

"Uh, I'll pass, watching somebody get cut open isn't my idea of fun," Jan replied. Surprising her, the A.I smiled.

"Oh don't worry, its a simple procedure."

* * *

>This is the last time I ever trust that little harlet, Jan thought to herself as she watched the team of Elites and Grunts hovering over Sergeant Johnson.

The sight that had awaited the girl after Cortana had given her instructions on how to reach the medical bay was several Grunts standing around an incubator tank As she moved closer she saw what was inside the tank. It was an arm. To be exact, it was Sergeant Johnson's arm, and it wasn't attached to his body.

"I'm sorry Sergeant, but for this procedure your will need to stay conscious," Cortana's voice filled the room.

"Alright," Johnson said through gritted teeth as one of the Elites stuck his arm with a needle. "This is really going to hurt isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Cortana said, and Jan was slightly surprised to hear a sympathetic note in the A.I's voice.

"I'll grin and bear it, but it'd be nice if you could keep talking to me, give me something to concentrate on other than these guys," Johnson said, indicating the Elites and Grunts.

Jan watched, in morbid facination as an Elite lifted the severed arm from the incubator tank and brought it over to where the sergeant lay.

"Surprisingly the nerves in your severed arm haven't died out. I presume that because of the Flood DNA that has taken up residence inside your blood stream, your arm was somehow able to self-preserve itself for an extended period of time."

"Facinating," Johnson ground out.

"After analysis of the blood currently inside the severed arm, it seems that despite the Boren's Syndrome that you suffered during the Siege of Paris IV, your nerves have been reacting to stimulous, and I believe that with proper incentive, they could reform with the nerve endings in your shoulder."

"I told that big fly trap I don't die. Didn't know that would mean whatever bits and pieces he knocked off of me wouldn't die either" Johnson said, wincing and grunting audibly as one of the Elites began cutting into the flesh at his shoulder.

Jan stared hard, tuning out the sergeant and Cortana as the Elites repeated the cutting manuever on the end of the severed arm. Fascinated Jan watched that while Johnson couldn't see what the Elites were doing, he seemed to be wincing each moment the scalpel made contact with the severed arm. With exaggerated caution, the Elites then moved the severed arm and pressed it against the bleeding flesh of the sergeant's shoulder.

"Hold it there," Cortana ordered. "We'll know in a moment if this is going to work."

Unconsciously Jan moved closer, getting within several feet of the gathered Elites. The Grunts were standing back now, conversing amongst themselves whilst the Elites attempted to finish the procedure.

A collective gasp seemed to arise from everyone in the room when Sergeant Johnson suddenly screamed in agony. His body began convulsing violently and the Elites rushed to hold him still. Jan moved without thinking and rushed forward, grabbing onto the sergeant's other arm and trying to hold him still.

"The arm is reattaching itself," the Elite holding the severed arm announced in astonishment. Jan craned her neck, and saw that the Elite was right. The torn flesh on the Sergeant's arm was slowly melding in with the flesh from his shoulder. The room grew silent aside from the controlled thrashings of Sergeant Johnson, as everyone watched the process that was undergoing.

_That has got to be painful, _Jan winced to herself. An audible crack was produced when what must have been the sergeant's scapula and humerus bones broke themselves down so they could refit together. She dared a look at Johnson's face, and saw that he was unconscious. His

eyes had rolled to the back of his head. The convulsing suddenly stopped, and Jan lifted her head to see that Johnson's arm had reattached itself.

"Well," Cortana's voice filled the room once more. "That wasn't so bad was it?"

* * *

>The council chamber was quiet as the Master Chief and the Arbiter stepped inside. The ONI commanders and admirals were still seated in the same positions than when the Master Chief had last seen them. Commander Keyes was standing off to the side of the room, and she hadn't looked at either of the two soldiers since they had entered.<p><p>

Admiral Cortez leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table as he stared hard at the Arbiter.

"The council has come to a unanimous decision. We've decided that it would be in Earth's best interests if we had you Elites on our side," he said. "Can we expect the full cooperation of all your kind?"

The Arbiter stepped forward from beside the Master Chief and knelt down.

"I swear on my life, that I will rally my people to this cause, and together we shall eliminate the Covenant."

"Glad to hear it," Cortez smiled uneasily. "Despite the protest of some of our tech crewmen I'm going to request that the Covenant ship you arrived in, be automatically turned over to your discretion. My only request is that you allow a small contingency of Marines to go along, so they can report back to us if anything is amiss."

"I have no problem with that," the Arbiter replied, as the Master Chief suddenly took a step forward and spoke up.

"Sir, I request that I be assigned in place of the other Marines to travel with the Arbiter," he said, his voice firm.

"Chief?" Cortez said, confused.

"Sir, I believe it would be easier to send myself instead of a company of Marines. With Cortana along, it will make sending transmissions back to Earth easier and more efficient."

Admiral Cortez watched the Master Chief in silence for a long moment.

"If you think you'd be better served going with the Arbiter, Chief, than I trust your decision," he said finally.

"Thank you sir," the Master Chief responded. "Are we dismissed?"

Admiral Cortez looked uncomfortable for a moment, before hardening his features.

"There's just one other item that we need to address," he announced,

and turned to the Arbiter. "While we have decided that striking an alliance with the excommunicated Covenant members is in our best interests, we also decided that the crimes of the past cannot be forgotten so easily. In that case, we have reached a general consensus. Once the war with the Covenant is over, you shall return to Earth, provided this war does not cost you your life, and upon your return you will be charged with crimes against humanity. If you are found guilty, then you will be put to death."

* * *

>"Bah, those fools are too trusting for their own good," Colonel Ackerson said bitterly to himself, reclining backwards onto the plush leather in the back seat of his car. His driver chose to pretend that his hearing had gone out, and did not bother reacting when Ackerson spoke.<p><p>

Why delay the execution of that vermin? the Colonel mentally asked himself. _All we're doing is delaying the inevitable. Forming an alliance with those worthless Elites, Hunters, and Grunts is just going to waste assets. If they weren't good enough for the Covenant, why should we bother picking up their scraps? If the damned incompetant morons at ONI would just read some of the reports I send across their desks than they'd know we don't have to worry about alliances and all that other garbage._

Ackerson continued ranting to himself as the driver turned off the main road and headed for a facility located a few miles on a side road. Without any preamble the Colonel got out of the stopped car and entered the building. The Marines posted as guards didn't bother asking for identification, the amount of time Ackerson had been spending in the facility lately was so great that even new additions to the roster knew him by sight.

Passing through several corridors and walkways, Ackerson finally arrived at his office. He was not one to suffer foolish security measures in the areas of work like Section III, but he had ensured that his office would be given every piece of updated security. Ever since he had found himself with allocated funds, and a transfer to front lines, the Colonel had taken an extra special concern with security measures in his private life.

"CPO Mendez, give me status reports on my wonderful little experiments," Ackerson said as he set his briefcase down at his desk and accessed his comm tablet.

A pedastal located in the corner of the office came to life and the figure of a man in firmly pressed fatigues appeared.

"At once Colonel, uploading them to your tablet now," the A.I's voice was rough. Ackerson sat back into his chair as the data appeared on the translucent screen.

"Hmm, it seems they've been busy today. Seventeen live-fire agility tests, and four demolition missions. Just what have those cooks been putting into their morning meals to make them so restless?" Ackerson mused to himself, chuckling at his own wit.

"They have been voicing their concerns that they are ready for combat sir, and given the situation surrounding the planet right now, I have

to agree with them," the A.I announced.

"Why your absolutely right Petty Officer Mendez," Ackerson said, setting the tablet down. "As their training officer what would you say is their effectiveness rate at the moment?"

"Ninety eight percent, Colonel. That is with thirteen thousand simulated battle hazards and events."

"Thank you Mendez," Ackerson said, then smiled to himself. "You know, I don't say it often but I am extremely grateful that I was able to obtain a scan of your nueral brain patterns before your host body passed on. Granted you were looking a little senile in some areas, but so far you've been an amazing asset. With that stupid bitch Halsey out running around with one of the last of her freaks, I've been able to move about uncontested, and now that my little experiments are ready for deployment, I'm about to become to new favorite of those cretins over at ONI."

"Of course Colonel," CPO Mendez replied.

"Its a shame the old Mendez had to die when Reach fell along with all those other freaks-in-training, but it is for the best I suppose. I do know he would have liked to be here though, when all the fruits of his labor paid off, and the real human warriors were born. Do send them in will you?"

"At once Colonel," the A.I said, before disappearing.

Ackerson leaned back in his chair; his earlier bad mood seemingly evaporated.

"They are on their way, Colonel," Mendez announced upon returning to the room. Ackerson didn't acknowledge the A.I as he waited, watching the door to his office. He kept the door open, and he wiped the smile from his face when he saw them approaching his office. They filed in, and announced their presence.

"CPO Mendez has informed me that you think you are all ready for combat, is this true?" Ackerson asked the assembled group.

"Yes sir!" they replied enthusiastically.

"Well it just so happens that I may have a mission for you. Your inferior counterpart, the Master Chief, has returned from the second Halo Installation, with news that he has once again destroyed it. Despite this, the damage may not be as severe as before, and retrieving samples of the Flood should still be possible. Your first mission shall be a search and recover, of Delta Halo, and the capture of Flood specimens."

Ackerson walked forward and patted the armored arm of one of the soldiers.

"I have complete faith in you seven soldiers, my dear 3.0's."

* * *

>AN: Lots of development here folks, and plenty of foreshadowing into this next arc. Hope everybody enjoyed it, and

please let me know what you think of the glorious return into this time frame.**

17. The End of a War Chapter 16

****Author's Notes:** Here we are. I'm going to go out on a limb and make the general statement that we've entered the later part of this story. In my honest opinion, I'd have to say that the final 10 or so chapters that I'll be writing would most certainly be the best. I finally have free reign to wreck havoc with all the characters. If you've read my previous stuff, you'll know I take a special joy in messing around with everybody, so let that be a little omen for the rest of this story.**

****Just a warning here, the start of this chapter is NOT in the past. It's taking place on the Covenant home world.****

The End of a War

Chapter 16

Never Bring a Knife to a Gunfight

Lan 'Eranumee slumped against the outer wall of the training facility, his eyes hooded as he slowly brought the Plasma Rifle in his hands up to his chest. The screams and cries for blood and flesh seemed to echo around him and with a tired glance the Sangheili saw another squad of Kig-Yar get mowed down by a stationary turret manned by a lone Unggoy. Before the Unggoy could rejoice, a Jiralhanae appeared from a far alleyway and fired his Brute Shot. The explosive round slammed into the base of the turret, and showered the Unggoy with shrapnel, ripping it to shreds.

"Find any Sangheili that still breathe and rip them apart!" the Jiralhanae shouted, and more of his bestial race poured from the alleyways and began pounding across the streets.

'Eranumee groaned painfully as he forced himself to his feet, and began to limp away from the maddened creatures, praying that they would not spot him. His luck had run out however, and one of the Jiralhanae shouted to his brethren, whilst pointing in 'Eranumee's direction.

Goddamn them! 'Eranumee raged to himself as he took off at a sprint, wincing each time his left leg impacted the ground. The squad of Yanme'e he had encountered earlier had managed to injure him before he had a chance to flee. The plasma wound he had suffered was seriously halting his progress, and 'Eranumee feared it would cost him his life before he could accomplish his mission.

It had started only a few days ago, when a transmission from the Prophet of Truth had reached the Covenant home world, Danrun. 'Eranumee had been servicing his Seraph fighter when he had heard the announcement over the communications net for the entire planet. The Sangheili, Unggoy, and Lekgolo were traitors to the Covenant, to the Forerunner, and because of it, they were to be annihilated. There had been only a few hours of silence before the entire planet had erupted into war.

The division of forces had occurred quickly, with the Sangheili, Unggoy, and Lekgolo moving towards the capital city of the planet, Forunpo. The Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar, and Yanme'e had been better prepared however, and were assaulting the forces before they had time to formulate a strategy.

'Eranumee had thought it to be a some kind of joke, but those thoughts were dispelled when he had climbed high into the planets atmosphere and watched as the Jiralhanae fleet sent wave after wave of plasma racing down to burn the training facility the Sangheili operated at Gorlon Base.

It had not been much longer before the Sangheili realized that they had been betrayed by the Prophets. Something must have occurred on the Holy Ring that the Prophet of Regret had discovered only weeks ago.

Pondering over the exact reasons as to why the Sangheili were now the Covenant's enemy was not wise, and 'Eranumee had forced himself onto the task at hand. The Sangheili had attempted to contact his squadron commander back at the base, but he received no response to his hails.

While 'Eranumee attempted to think of a course of action, the entire battle net soon became flooded with cries for assistance from Sangheili units stationed on the ground. The Jiralhanae were leading a campaign against them, and they were vastly outnumbered.

High Councilman 'Lo Pondomee had gotten onto the planet-wide battle net that the Sangheili were tuned into, and informed all extradited Covenant members with a recited speech.

"My brothers, we have spent countless ages devoted to the cause the Prophets laid before us. Our faith was matched only by our delusion. I urge you, my brethren, fight! We are the Sangheili. Scorned and betrayed, we will become the Prophets nightmare. The Gods themselves will tremble before our fury, and we will split this world in two. Carry your faith proud, for we are the Sangheili, and no longer will we be the vanguard of the Covenant."

"Our brothers, the Unggoy and the Lekgolo have joined our cause. They are free of the Prophet's will, and together we will fight. They are forever our brothers, and in death they will ascend greatness. We are the Sangheili, and we will fight till the last Prophet falls."

"The Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar, and the Yanme'e have chosen to serve the Prophets, and that decision will be their demise. Do not let mercy stay your hand. They are our enemy. Our forces are rallying in the eastern sector of the planet. From Forunpo, to Gestahl, we have fortified our defenses. The mighty fleet is preparing to lash out against the Jiralhanae ships, and to stop their cowardice. For those of our omnipotent forces that are located inside our enemy's controlled sectors, you must join with our main force."

The transmission had repeated itself constantly after that, and 'Eranumee had decided it would be best to heed the High Councilman's words and head for the eastern sector of the planet.

What brought the Sangheili to his current predicament had occurred shortly after he had reentered the planets atmosphere. 'Eranumee had

known his presence could only go unnoticed for so long, so when he heard the Jiralhanae ship requesting his clearance signal, he put his Seraph fighter into a low dive. Hoping that before the fleet would decide to send ships out after him, 'Eranumee ignored their hails and continued to push the Seraph fighter to its limits.

His luck was not holding out however, and a squadron of fighters was deployed.

'Eranumee was a skilled pilot; he had participated in dozens of missions against the humans. Their Longsword fighters were interesting crafts, and in the hands of a capable human they could be quite deadly. To 'Eranumee, he believed that to truly be an experienced and competent pilot, one needed to first respect his opponents. The humans he could respect, but the Jiralhanae were not worthy. They commanded their ships with brute force; there was no subtlety in their movements. The fetid creatures had no touch of elegance when it came to commanding a fighter, and 'Eranumee knew that if he had two or three more fighters on his wing, the squadron of Jiralhanae fighters would be decimated in seconds. However, he was outnumbered ten to one, and they had the advantage of air space over him.

One of the fighters scored a lucky hit, and a plasma torpedo slammed into the rear side of 'Eranumee's ship.

The Sangheili pilot would have surely perished if not for the Jiralhanae breaking formation and writing him off for dead. As it was the moment he had felt the squadron of fighters disengage, 'Eranumee engaged the autopilot, hoping the Seraph would be able to glide for another few thousand miles before finally crashing, and ejected from the craft.

'Eranumee's squadron commander had ensured that all of his squad mates knew the necessity of ejecting. While the majority of their battles took place in the emptiness of space, the few instances where fighting within a planet's atmosphere would allow the opportunity to eject from a downed ship. It was certainly something the Prophets would have never allowed had they discovered it, but now it seemed the Prophets were all too willing in the past to let the Sangheili sacrifice themselves needlessly.

A quick scan of the area had confirmed to 'Eranumee that he had landed just a few miles west of Forunpo.

If I had waited perhaps a few moments longer, I would have landed directly in the city limits, 'Eranumee mused bitterly as he heard the Jiralhanae snarl amongst themselves as they charged towards his location. He pulled the Plasma Pistol from his waist and positioned himself behind a fallen section of a nearby building.

'Eranumee stilled his breath and waited, motionless while the sounds of the Jiralhanae grew louder, and they finally appeared around the corner of the building. Without a sound the Sangheili pilot let the charged Plasma Pistol discharge, and watched as the concentrated plasma ball slammed into one of the lead Jiralhanae's face, melting away the front portions of his head. With a snarl of rage the other beasts ducked back around the building, firing sporadic shots from their Brute Shots.

"You are wasting our time Sangheili scum!" one of the Jiralhanae shouted from behind cover. "Expose yourself so that we may tear your flesh from your body."

'Eranumee didn't bother responding to the obvious bait, and instead cast a look at his surroundings, trying to discover something that may turn the tables in his favor.

He spotted it then, the open section of the building, whose debris he was crouched behind. The Sangheili unlimbered a plasma grenade that he had collected from a fallen Unggoy, and activated it. With a grunt of exertion, he tossed the grenade through the collapsed section of the building, to the far wall that the Jiralhanae were hidden behind.

With a satisfying crack, the grenade detonated, and as 'Eranumee expected, the previous damage to the building was severe enough to cause the superstructure to begin to collapse. The Jiralhanae were still trying to figure out what the explosion was when the upper portions of the wall that they were hiding behind suddenly fell upon them.

'Eranumee waited for a few moments, to see if any of the Jiralhanae had lived, but nothing aside from the distant sounds of plasma fire and explosions could be heard.

The Sangheili pilot climbed to his feet, and was prepared to continue towards Forunpo, when he collapsed back to the ground, crying out in pain. With a wince he cast a look down to his wounded leg, and saw that it was bleeding profusely.

Damn! I will be unconscious in only a few hours with at this rate.

The medical kit he had carried aboard his Seraph fighter had been destroyed during his ejection from the ship and whatever he might have been able to salvage from the dead bodies of the Jiralhanae was now buried beneath several tonnes of rubble.

Frustrated, 'Eranumee slammed his fist against the broken debris littered around him. Slowly his gaze melted down to the Plasma Pistol in his hand. The weapon had overheated after his initial blast, and the heat was pouring off it in waves. He stared at the pistol for a long moment. With care, the Sangheili pilot removed his finger from the trigger guard and moved the weapon towards the torn flesh on his leg.

This is really going to hurt.

Clenching his mandibles tightly, 'Eranumee placed the end of the Plasma Pistol onto his flesh, which emitted a loud hissing sound as the wound began to cauterize. A strangled cry erupted from the Sangheili's throat and he felt his mouth fill with blood. His teeth had ripped through the skin in his mouth.

With a final grunt 'Eranumee tossed the weapon away, and fell back to the ground, fighting back the urge to scream over the searing pain. After a moment when he was sure he had gotten the pain under control, the Sangheili pilot glanced down at his wound. The flesh was seared, and a mark larger than his fist now adorned his leg.

Tentatively, he climbed to his feet, careful to keep weight off his injured leg.

Now that I am no longer in danger of dieing from blood loss, I must see what I can do about finding my way into Forunpo._

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed down the street, and 'Eranumee hurriedly grabbed for his discarded Plasma Pistol. Limping to his earlier cover, the Sangheili propped himself up and watched the far street for signs of enemy movement.

A sigh of relief escaped 'Eranumee when a pair of Lekgolo emerged from the alleyway and stormed their way across the street. He shifted back onto his feet and stood slowly, prepared to call out to the friendly soldiers. His movements stopped however, when the unmistakable sound of a Spectre came from behind him. Turning, 'Eranumee's fears were proven correct when he saw the Covenant vehicle bearing down the street at top speed. A pair of Jiralhanae were aboard, one driving whilst the other operated the plasma turret on the back.

Luckily for 'Eranumee, their attention seemed fixated on the Lekgolo, for they blew past his location, heading straight down the street. The Lekgolo had noticed the Jiralhanae's presence, and their Fuel Rod Cannons flared with energy as they readied to fire.

The Jiralhanae on the back of the Spectre opened fire, sending a constant stream of plasma at the Lekgolo, obstructing their view and forcing the pair to shield themselves.

'Eranumee watched, confused as one of the Lekgolo seemed to shift the large shield attached to his armor. With a massive thrust, the warrior slammed the tip of the shield into the ground, and holding it at an angle. The other Lekgolo stood behind the other warrior and braced his body against his bond brother's back.

It was several moments before the Sangheili pilot understood what the Lekgolo pair were doing. When he did, a low chuckle arose from his throat even as he worried that the gamble would not pay off.

The Jiralhanae figured out what the Lekgolo were doing only moments later, but it was too late. The driver had been intent on ramming the pair, since the turret mounted on the back of the Spectre had little effect on them. He attempted to swerve, and bring the Spectre out of it's intended path, but it hit the slanted shield the Lekgolo held rooted to the ground. The Spectre was thrown off to the side, careening down the street upside down, before finally sliding to a stop.

Before the Jiralhanae had a chance to get themselves reoriented, the Lekgolo were upon them. With several quick slashes from their massive shields, the Jiralhanae were down, and they would not be getting back up. The pair of Lekgolo turned towards the fallen Spectre, and prepared to fire at it.

"Wait!" 'Eranumee cried as he forced himself to move forward. His words registered with the Lekgolo, and they turned momentarily towards him. "Do not destroy that craft!"

It took some time, but 'Eranumee eventually made it over to the Lekgolo. They lowered their weapons as he approached, and merely watched him curiously.

"I request that you lend me some assistance," 'Eranumee said, breathless. The Lekgolo glanced at one another for a moment before looking back at him. "Please, overturn that Spectre."

'Eranumee was worried for a moment, that the Lekgolo had not understood him. His worries were dispelled however, when one of the pair turned and with great ease, planted it's shield under the Spectre and flipped it up and righted the craft with one heave.

Wasting no time, 'Eranumee climbed into the driver's seat of the Spectre, and checked to see if the craft was still functional. He felt a smirk draw across his face when the Spectre started, and ran idle without any problems.

"Thank you, my brothers. If you would like, I shall give you a ride back to Forunpo," 'Eranumee said to the Lekgolo pair.

Surprising him, the Lekgolo merely shook their heads, and one of them indicated with his shield down the far street, where the sounds of sporadic explosions could be heard.

'Eranumee nodded at them.

"May the Gods watch over you."

* * *

>'Lo Pondomee, High Councilor of the Sangheili, was at the moment concerned. His Honor Guard detail had ushered him into a heavily fortified military compound, and while he was safe for the moment, the same could not be said about the other Sangheili and their allies fighting against the Covenant. Random reports had been filtering into the compound for hours, informing the councilor that their forces were holding the defenses of the eastern bloc, but those unfortunate enough to be outside of the Sangheili military territories were being slaughtered. <p>Anti-cruiser plasma cannons were holding the Jiralhanae fleet at bay, and as a result they didn't have to worry about any orbital bombardments yet. Several Wraith battalions had been deployed along the temporary borders, and their continued assaults kept the Covenant from breaking through the lines.<p>

"Councilor!" a Sangheili Infantry Major shouted as he entered the room. "We have received a transmission from the _Devout Operator._"

"Show me," Pondomee ordered. The Sangheili warrior quickly uploading the file into the central control panel located near the center of the room. Within moments an image was projected in the center of the room. A Sangheili warrior was there, facing whatever was recording his message. Behind him several Unggoy and Sangheili were firing controlled bursts at a nearby airfield.

"This is Commander Aionee. My regiment has been fighting to retake the air base in central Gonlun for hours. The Jiralhanae have

fortified themselves in well, but we are slowly thinning their ranks. Within a few moments I will attack with my main force into the center of the base, and break their line of defense. I request that additional reinforcements be sent in once the base has been retaken. There is no telling how long it would take the Covenant to reorganize themselves, but when they do I will need more troopsâ€|"

A sudden explosion rocked the Sangheili off his feet, and for a moment nothing but dust and dirt filled the screen. Aionee reappeared shortly, and his gaze drifted down towards the air base.

"By the Godsâ€|" he exasperated. "All forces fall back, I repeat, all forces move back! The Covenant fleet is firing on their own positions!"

The Sangheili warrior turned back to face the recording.

"The Jiralhanae managed to activate the ship. The Forgotten Legacy has moved into low orbit. All ground defenses must be evacuated! Take to the skies my brothers! Return to our home world!"

Before the Commander could say anything else another explosion impacted nearby, this time much closer, and the image went blank signifying a break in the feed. Silence filled the room for a moment, and was broken when Pondomee slammed his fists upon the center console.

"Goddamn the Covenant!" he exclaimed, and with an exaggerated gesture he turned to the other Sangheili around him. "Order the fleet to be on the lookout for the Forerunner ship. If we can keep it at bay long enough, we may be able to devise a method to take it out."

"Is that wise?" one of the other Sangheili councilors asked. "I believe we should deliberate what Commander Aionee suggested, and think about evacuating our forces."

"We will not give up this planet!" Pondomee shouted angrily. "The Covenant will win this battle, and they will not win the war. Send for a pilot at once."

"For what cause Councilor?" the Sangheili councilor asked.

"Commander Aionee was right about one thing. We will need reinforcements, and word must be sent to our home world. The Jiralhanae fleet is intercepting any outgoing transmissions, so we are forced to get our message out physically," Pondomee explained.

"But finding a pilot in the disorder that has been caused here would take time, Councilor," the councilman pointed out.

"I believe I may have a solution," the Sangheili Major that had entered earlier, interjected. "I will return in a moment."

The High Councilors were forced to wait in uneasy silence while they anticipated the Major's return. He did so, and trailing behind him was another Sangheili, who was limping badly.

"I bring to you Councilors, Lan 'Eranumee," the Major announced.

"This warrior arrived only a few minutes before I received Commander Aionee's message. He is a squadron pilot located in Gorlon Base."

"He is injured," Pondomee pointed out, not as a reprimand, but as an observation.

"A wound he endured while battling through the Covenant lines whilst he attempted to return to our territories, so that he may return himself to a ship and wreck havoc with the enemy fleet," the Major elaborated.

Pondomee looked at the Sangheili warrior closely for a moment, catching his gaze with his own. After a time a smirk broke out on the elder Sangheili's face.

"Very well, I thank you Major, for brining this warrior to our attention," Pondomee offered as he stepped forward and addressed 'Eranumee. "I see that despite your injuries you are eager to return to the front lines."

"I have a duty, Councilor, and I endure any wounds if I may be given the opportunity to fight our enemy," 'Eranumee replied stoically.

"I am afraid the duty that I must give you will not allow you to fight the Covenant fleet just yet, but I assure you it is of the gravest of importance. The Jiralhanae have managed to recover the Forerunner ships, and they will be assaulting our positions soon. If we are to have victory upon this planet, we will need reinforcements. I ask this of you, will you return to our home planet, and inform our brothers of the situation here?" Pondomee asked.

"If you ask it of me, I will do this task, even if it costs me my life," 'Eranumee said. Pondomee clapped him upon the shoulder once, and gestured his hand towards the entrance to the compound.

"Very well, you shall take my personal craft, the Attrition. It's Slip Space drive is quite weak compared to our cruisers, but its small size makes up for that shortcoming. You will require a crew of no more than twenty warriors. I expect the Jiralhanae to attempt to follow you, but I know you are a skilled pilot, and they will not catch you. If there are no hindrances you should reach your destination in less than two days time."

Pondomee nodded once at the Sangheili pilot before turning away and moving back towards the gathered councilors, but not before he sent one final comment over his shoulder.

"Your success or failure will determine the fate of us all, Lan 'Eranumee, and I wish you good luck."

* * *

>A tense atmosphere had descended on Honor Without Mercy
after it slipped into Slip Space. The Elites knowledge that they were headed back to their home world did little to cease the dark thoughts that brewed within them.

The fact that the Master Chief himself was traveling along with them, as a simple passenger didn't do much to improve their moods, despite

the Arbiter's assurances that his presence would do them all more good than harm. The Spartan himself wasn't expecting a warm reception, and as such he decided to spend most of his time on the bridge, with the Arbiter and Cortana.

"You are troubled, Demon?" the Arbiter asked from his position near the head of the bridge. The Master Chief looked up from where he had been staring at the deck floor while the ship continued its course through Slip Space.

"There are a bunch of things I've been neglecting for the past while, and just now it seems that they're all catching up to me," John had replied, and then clammed up. He had not been in the mood to speak with anyone, and not even Cortana had managed to break him from his broodings.

"Don't get too miffed over his attitude," Cortana interjected from her place on the main pedestal inside the bridge. "He's been more chatty lately than I've ever seen him be in the past few months. I think he might be trying to make up for lost time."

The Arbiter grunted, agreeing even as the Master Chief tried to tune them out. His mind was drifting off to many of the things that had been occupying his mind for the past few days while they were on their constant Slip Space journey.

Everything to his fellow Spartans, Jan, and even Dr. Halsey and Kelly were floating around inside of his mind, and the sheer weight of it all was starting to give him a headache.

To think that I would find myself wishing for someone to confide in, John thought, even as his gaze slipped to Cortana's figure. The A.I. had become close to him physically and emotionally in only a few months, and even he had been surprised by the amount of emotion he felt, back when he had thought he'd be leaving her to face certain death on High Charity. He couldn't tell her though just what he was thinking about, considering even he himself wasn't sure about everything that was going on.

"Oh my, this ship is of a very interesting design," a new voice announced as it entered through the bridge doors. John knew who it was even before he heard Cortana let out a groan of incredulity.

343 Guilty Spark twisted in several directions as it took in the bridge's architecture and it's occupants.

"Remind me again why we had to take him along," Cortana said to the Arbiter as she pressed a hand to her forehead, as if fighting the onset of a headache.

"The true purpose of the Forerunner's legacy may be changed, but the Oracle's role has not, and I am certain that it shall play a vital duty in ensuring the High Council of my home planet is given the opportunity to hear the truth," the Arbiter replied.

"Okay," Cortana responded. "But couldn't we just keep him in lockdown or something until we get there? His constant floating around is starting to tick me off, and I can't tell you how many times I wish I would have gotten the Admiralty on Earth to keep him there."

"Oh yes, I was quite surprised that you would want me to leave the installation on the Ark," Guilty Spark said suddenly. "It is against protocol to abandon a functioning installation, but I suppose I can make an exception seeing as how we'll be arriving at another."

Something about that last bit the monitor said clicked in John's mind, and he looked over at the Forerunner device.

"What was that about another installation?" he asked Guilty Spark. The monitor seemed to be preoccupied however, and simply ignored the Spartan while it hummed to itself, observing the control panels and consoles that adorned the bridge.

The Master Chief slowly slipped back into his previous brooding state, now more confused than ever.

* * *

>Damn you Chief, Jan fumed to herself as she drummed her fingers on the table she was currently sitting at. The young girl slumped her head down to rest on the hardened surface even as she closed her eyes and tried to fight the growing sense of anger inside of her.

It had only been a few days since the Master Chief had, quite sneakily gotten her off of Honor Without Mercy only moments before it had suddenly rocketed away from Earth and disappeared into the wonders on Slip Space. Jan had naturally been upset over the Spartan's deception at the time, and now days later that same upset was slowly growing larger and larger in magnitude.

'O_h sure, don't worry Jan, Commander Keyes just needs you to escort Sergeant Johnson down the gravity lift. Once he's back on the ground I'll get Cortana to reverse the lift and bring you right back up.'
_Jan quoted to herself mentally. _First I get tricked into watching someone have their arm reattached, but now I get left behind on Earth while the Master Chief and the other ex-Covenant members go off to save humanity, the cosmos, and maybe even time itself._

With a deep sigh Jan pushed herself away from the table and stood up, walking nimbly by the dozing Marine guard Commander Keyes had left with her when she went further on into the ONI facility earlier.

I'm sure there won't be any harm in wandering around for a little while.

The security measures inside the ONI facility had decreased immensely after the Covenant ship had left, making it easy for Jan to leave the current area she was in and move on into a different section. With barely a glance she walked past two stationed Marine guards, who didn't even look twice at her navy tech uniform Commander Keyes had procured for her.

"I don't care what assurances you can give me Colonel, I can't authorize your mission. Carriers are in short supply around here, and sparing one for a project without sanction by Section III would be asking me to lose my position. Now, if you'll excuse me I have work to do."

Jan heard the voice come from one of the many rooms adorning the corridor, and she moved towards the open door where the conversation had originated, just in time to see a man in a Colonel's uniform emerge. Recognition sprung within Jan's mind as she discreetly watched the Colonel storm off. She had seen him around the base for the past few days, and she could always pick him out since he was always going on about the injustice Section III was doing by allowing the Master Chief to leave the planet with the Covenant.

Sheltered in the HighCom Facility, Jan had been cut off from the outside world, more by her own decision than any kind of restriction placed on her by the UNSC or ONI. What little word she had overheard about the rest of Earth detailed the potential civilian unrest involving the seemingly mysterious events over the past week. While ONI had tried to keep a tight leash on the media, footage of the Covenant cruiser landing on Earth unmolested had already circulated around the globe, and the public wanted answers. ONI wasn't prepared to give them any however, and that only seemed to incense the public further.

Shrugging her shoulders Jan continued on, not really following the angered Colonel, but going in the same direction as him anyway. When he suddenly glanced around him to see if anyone was watching him, Jan's interest was piqued, and she made a discerning glance away so as not to give the Colonel reason to suspect her. His paranoia soothed, the Colonel pulled out his chatter and activated it, making a call as he turned down another corridor.

Jan quickly followed him, but hung back, hoping the Colonel wouldn't speak low enough that she couldn't hear him.

She was in luck.

"These fools here are sticking to protocol. Unless I divulge the fine details of my project they won't authorize the use of any UNSC ships to go search for my missing frigate," he said intently. There was a pause as whoever he was speaking to replied. "That has nothing to do with it. I sent my soldiers to accomplish a mission, and they haven't been heard from in almost two days!" Another pause. "The project cannot be completed without the Flood specimens. The SPARTAN II's received their augmentations, which set them apart from the rest of the military. I'm not willing to turn my soldiers into cybernetic freaks, so to give them an edge over Halsey's little pets, I need that Flood DNA."

The Colonel paused to check around him once more, and Jan quickly ducked into a branching hallway, careful not to let her eavesdropping become interrupted.

"I know there are special circumstances involving the Sergeant's DNA, but because of the radiation we've been systematically introducing the S-III's to, they are as close to a perfect match than we can get without risking their deaths of Boren's Syndrome."

Jan slipped back into the main corridor as the Colonel once again continued on his way.

"There isn't much else we can do right now, if no word is sent back from the team in the next day than I will have to inform the Joint

Chief's of the UNSC and the Admiralty about what I did. They may not like it, but facing the possibility of having no SPARTAN II's around to protect Earth once the Covenant return, they will be forced to accept the terms that I give them, and send out a carrier group to locate the missing frigateâ€|"

The feeling of a hand brushing against her shoulder startled Jan, and she nearly screamed in surprise even as she twisted around and fell backwards, planting a hand on the floor and flipping back and away from whatever had snuck up behind her.

"What are you doing here?" Commander Miranda Keyes asked her, placing her hands firmly on her waist. Jan took a moment to respond, catching her breath momentarily.

"Uh, well I needed to use the washroom and I asked my keeper you've had following me around everywhere, but he didn't say much so I left to find it on my own," Jan offered.

Commander Keyes rolled her eyes even as she smiled.

"Well c'mon, its lunchtime and all these debriefings have made me hungry. I'll drive us to a restaurant," she said and beckoned for Jan to follow as she turned and walked down the opposite end of the corridor.

Jan begrudgingly followed, but not before casting one final glance at the Colonel as he continued on his way.

* * *

>Lan 'Eranumee could only lean back in his seat helplessly as the ship he and the other Sangheili had left Danrun in, drifted silently through Slip Space. Climbing through the planet's atmosphere had been simple, but the moment the Attrition entered space, the Jiralhanae fleet had pounced upon them.

If not for the inclusion of a shield generator on the ship, 'Eranumee knew that their ship would have surely perished under the assault of the carriers and Seraph fighter squadrons.

_However, while we may have escaped death at the hands of the Jiralhanae on Danrun, they will undoubtedly be awaiting our arrival on our home world. The destination of this ship is clear, even to the Jiralhanae beasts, and they will beat us there. The High Councilor himself said the Slip Space generator is weak for this craft, and we will be surpassed by the Jiralhanae soon. _

'Eranumee let his gaze drift from the cockpit view to the copilot's seat, which was empty.

I was the only pilot the entire Sangheili forces could conjure in time to depart. Assuredly with the Forerunner ship's strength, the forces on Danrun will slowly be decimated.

That thought stirred anger within the Sangheili pilot, and he fought the urge to smash his fist upon the ships controls.

_This task was given to me to carry out, and even if it means my death at the hands of the Jiralhanae, I will see that our people are

warned, and a force is gathered._

The Covenant will not win this war!

* * *

>Author's Notes: Here's a quick little glossary for anyone confused by any of the terms used in this chapter.

****Danrun - Covenant Home World****

****Forunpo - The Capital City of Danrun****

****Gestahl - Industrious City located in the far south of Danrun.****

****So yeah, now we all know what's been going on back in the Covie home world. Chief, Arbiter, and Cortana are headed for the Elite's home planet, and so is 'Eranumee, but the Jiralhanae fleet is going to beat him to the punch, but will the Master Chief arrive before them? Hmmm, I don't know.****

****Ackerson's up to his usual tricks, but it seems things aren't going the way he expected, which could mean bad news for all of Earth. Wonder what the S-III's ran into?****

****Jan's been left behind with Sergeant Johnson and Commander Keyes, but don't think their role in this story is over. Far from it actually.****

****A friendly reviewer pointed out in an e-mail that this fic is now the highest reviewed story in the entire Halo section here, which is just insane. You guys are nuts, but hey, I'm amazingly flattered, and I want to thank all of you that have taken the time to give me your thoughts, be them good or bad, about my writing.****

****Until next chapterâ€|****

18. The End of a War Chapter 17

****Author's Notes: Rolling right along here, we've finally managed to hit the Chapter 17 mark. I suppose the number isn't exactly commemorative, but what's inside should be. I always find it amusing when people question the amount of action in this story. Sure if you go by the game, then there's a staggering lack of guns blazing and grunts dying in here, but novels aren't meant to be some kind of action and gore fest. ****

****The actual Halo novels, aside from The Flood, which was mainly a carbon-copy of the game down on paper (not a criticism, just an observation), are based around story progression, not action sequences. Nylund mainly put in naval battle engagements, and for those wondering where mine are, this chapter should give you something to talk about.****

****For those wondering, yes eventually there will be those large-scale battles in this story, but we needed to get through massive story development first. Earth's safe for now, and as we head into the third quarter of this story we're seeing a shift of focus towards the**

Covenant side of things. Don't worry though, I won't forget about Earth.**

Also, if anyone was curious, most of the names I've used so far for the Covenant/Sangheili cities and planets are derived from ancient Greek cities. I just put a spin on them to make it slightly more unique.

The End of a War

Chapter 17

First Impressions Aren't Everything

"Have you an estimate on our arrival yet Construct?" the Arbiter asked Cortana as he watched several displays signifying _Honor Without Mercy_'s trajectory. The cruiser had been in transit for almost a week, and everyone aboard had already been showing signs of becoming anxious.

"We'll be exiting Slip Space in ten minutes. At that point we should be inside the system that houses your home world," Cortana replied from her place on the main pedestal inside the bridge.

The Arbiter gave a sound of approval before turning to his thoughts for a moment.

It has been nearly twenty cycles since I last saw Silone, and yet it feels as if it were only yesterday that I stepped aboard the Covenant cruiser that would inevitably take me to Danrun.

I left as a child, ready to prove my worth to the Covenant, regardless of how many I would need to slay. Now I return as the Arbiter, and with the hope of rallying my people together so that we may strike out and eliminate the Prophets. Is this why I feel ill? But my goal is just, and the path before me is the only one I may take.

Would my father approve of this? His devotion to the Covenant was near legend in my youth, and he gave his life to stop the Lekgolo uprising on Danrun. Does he look at me now and see nothing but a traitor? A heretic that has become blind to his duty?

The Arbiter slumped back in his seat at the Captain's chair on the bridge, his head slowly shifting downwards to stare at the cold, lifeless deck.

My father's devotion was his folly, as was my own. Foolishly accepting the untruths the Prophets gave led us down the path of evil, and now it is up to us as a race to redeem ourselves. Whatever my ancestors may think of my actions, I know what I must do. The Prophets must be stopped.

The sharp reports of heavy footsteps alerted the Arbiter to the Demon's arrival in the bridge, and he stared absently at the human soldier.

_Even amongst allies, the Demon does not lower his guard. Each movement he makes is purposeful, and adumbrates the true power that lies within him. At any moment he could become what his title

entails, and kill all those in this ship before we could even sound an alarm. _

To have created such a weapon, the humans are as mad as the Prophets.

"Exiting Slip Space, prepare for exit burn," Cortana announced, and the ship lurched forward momentarily. The displays showing the outboard monitors came online, and the Arbiter caught a glimpse of their destination.

"Proceed to bearing seven zero nine, Construct, and prepare to send the prerecorded message I gave you," the Arbiter ordered.

"Hold on a moment," Cortana replied, her voice tight. "I'm picking up multiple whispers near the other edge of the system. From the looks of things six capital ships are going to be exiting Slip Space in a few seconds."

"To whom are they loyal?" the Arbiter demanded. Silence greeted him as Cortana processed his request. He noticed the Demon cast him a short glance from where he stood.

_Whatever I may think of him, the Demon is fiercely loyal to his allies. I shall make an effort to step lightly from now on. It would not do for anything else to cause grief amongst us. _

"Several communication relays detected," Cortana divulged to the bridge crew. "They are Brute ships, and from what I can gather, it seems as if they're searching for something."

"Their purpose is no concern of mine. Ready all forward plasma cannons and torpedoes Construct; we shall destroy this pitiful fleet," the Arbiter ordered. Bemused, the Elite turned and regarded the Demon, who was staring at the displays showing the arrival of the Brute ships.

The Demon may be skilled in ground combat, but I shall show the prowess I possessed as a Commander.

"Remove all weapon safety locks Construct," the Arbiter said, "And warm up all forward Capital Plasma Turrets. Ensure that the plasma torpedoes are secure in their holdings."

There was a moment before Cortana replied.

"Done."

The Arbiter stood stoically on the bridge, his arms folded over his chest and his gaze watching the displays showing him the enemy ships. The Brute vessels hadn't detected their presence yet, which showed just how little the foolish creatures understood the ships they commanded.

Six capital ships against one flagship cruiser. Even with the ineptitude of the Brutes this will be difficult, speed and surprise are going to win this battle, so we had best keep ourselves off their radar for now.

"Shift engines to thirty five percent power output and keep any power

conduit leaks to a minimum. Change our heading to zero four three and alert the crew that will shall be entering battle in only a few moments."

The bridge had slowly become a flurry of activity, Elites moved quickly between the stations, ensuring that no area was overlooked as Honor Without Mercy slowly accelerated towards the Brute ships. Only the Arbiter and the Master Chief were motionless.

The Prophet of Mercy was always paranoid, and he outfitted his personal cruiser with eight Capital Plasma Turrets, along with four Plasma Torpedo stations. Along with the Holy Beam, this flagship is one of the most heavily armed ships in the entire Covenant army. It would appear his paranoia is going to save our lives this day._

"All forward plasma turrets are charged," Cortana said. "Energy emissions are controlled, and well below detectable range."

"Good," the Arbiter replied. "Be prepared to fire at any moment. The Brutes may be inferior, but it will not be long before they realize we are here."

The Brute fleet was substantially closer now, the distance between them and Honor Without Mercy had been cut in half. The ships were still sitting motionless in space however, and the Arbiter could see that their plasma cannons were lifeless.

"Alter our course to bearing zero seven nine, and bring the engines up to emergency speed."

"That course will take us right into the middle of the ships," Cortana pointed out.

"Indeed," the Arbiter replied ambiguously. His position had yet to change, and a slight glance to his right indicated that the Demon himself had also remained glued to his spot.

It has been a long time since I last commanded a ship in battle. Will I remember all that I have learned in countless battles of the past? If it comes to pass that my tactics have been forgotten, there won't be much time to lament on it. The Brute fleet will decimate us in seconds._

"Optimal range met for Capital Plasma Turrets," Cortana announced, then added, "I doubt I need to remind you that the plasma beam all Covenant flagships carry has a near unlimited range."

"I am aware," the Arbiter responded. "On my mark fire all forward Capital Plasma Turrets, and send two plasma torpedoes towards targets two and five. Once the torpedoes are away, power the engines down to eighty five percent output and bring the ship around to coordinates zero one three point five nine."

Acknowledgements rang out along the bridge and Honor Without Mercy sped closer to the Brute ships. The Arbiter watched intently as the ships grew larger and larger on the displays.

And so it begins._

"Fire!"

Honor Without Mercy shook violently as five of the eight plasma turrets opened fire, sending fiery red-hot streams of plasma racing away from the flagship and towards the Brute fleet. The moment the plasma torpedoes were fired, the Brute commanders appeared to have detected their presence.

The Arbiter watched as the ships readied their own plasma turrets to fire, but the Elite knew how long it would take to charge the plasma conduits before they could be fired. By that time two of their ships would be down, and Honor Without Mercy would be at a safe distance away.

"Multiple energy spikes within the Brute fleet," Cortana spoke out across the bridge, ensuring the others knew what was going on. "They are preparing to move."

The Arbiter watched as the supercharged plasma shots continued on their deadly course towards the Brute ships he had selected for destruction. The commander may have thought he could run, but in truth he was only minutes away from death.

"Thirty seven seconds before plasma shots intercept targets. Fifty eight seconds before the plasma torpedoes hit their mark," Cortana continued.

The bridge was silent as the plasma charges finally slammed into the two selected Brute cruisers, their shields flaring to life before flickering and then finally fading under the constant assault. With the shields out of the way the plasma torpedoes slammed unhindered into the underbelly of the two ships. The displays became flared with intense heat for a moment as the two Brute ships that were struck slowly tore apart with the aid of the plasma torpedoes.

The remaining Brute ships were scrambling now, moving away from the destroyed cruisers as they tried to get their bearings and assess the sudden threat.

Honor Without Mercy rocketed through the space where the Brute ships had previously occupied, and as the Arbiter had ordered, it began a slow bank to the left.

"Charge aft plasma turrets and prepare to fire at targets one, three and four. Cycle power conduits and reload plasma torpedo stations two and three. Power engines down and divert all energy from forward turrets to the rear thrusters," the Arbiter ordered.

It has been too long since I last stood upon the bridge of a ship and felt the exhilaration of battle. As my instructors used to tell me, battles within space are tactical. Raw fury and power is useless if there is not a steady hand and an astute mind to guide them.

The Brute ships had gotten a fix on Honor Without Mercy's position by now, and judging from what the displays showed, their energy beam projectors along with the plasma turrets were glowing white from the heat they produced. At any moment the ships would fire.

"Aft turrets at maximum efficiency. Power diverted to rear thrusters and engine powered down," Cortana informed the bridge.

"Fire aft turrets on my mark, and then launch three plasma torpedoes at each of the specified targets," the Arbiter announced. He stared at the white-hot turrets, mentally counting away the seconds.

With a snap of his mandibles, the Arbiter shouted, "Mark!"

The ships shuddered once more as the shots were fired from the rear of the ship. The plasma torpedoes were launched and slowly dipped towards the targeted Brute ships. As if on cue the moment _Honor Without Mercy_ fired its aft turrets the Brute ships responded in kind. The energy projectors fired and plasma lanced away from the cruisers and was directed towards the Arbiter's ship.

The Arbiter took a momentary deep breath and closed his eyes. It was time to see if he still had what it took to be a commander of ships in battle.

"Collision with plasma beam in fifteen seconds," Cortana's voice drifted through the bridge, and the Arbiter snapped to attention.

"Activate rear thrusters now! Course alteration to zero nine eight point five five."

The sudden influx of speed into _Honor Without Mercy_ sent all those not at a station flying back to slam into the rear portion of the bridge. The Arbiter managed to avoid landing painfully and quickly reoriented himself. He expected to see the Demon doing the same, but was surprised to see that the human soldier had grasped hold onto one of the center consoles and had avoided being thrown backwards.

I suppose I should have expected that.

A quick check of the displays showed the Arbiter that his gamble had paid off. The plasma beams that had previously been screaming towards them were now moving harmlessly through empty space. The rapid influx of a heat signature by the rear thrusters had thrown off the Brute ships targeting, resulting in a misfire.

"Charge the Holy Beam," the Arbiter ordered, even as he was checking the displays that showed the enemy ships, to see what his earlier shots had done.

One more Brute ship was now nothing more than lifeless debris, and one other had taken a hit on the forward nose of the cruiser, disabling most of its weaponry. Two other Brute ships were unharmed however, with nothing more than their shields damaged and they were going through the motions to prepare to fire once more.

"Energy Particle Beam charged," Cortana said, using the UNSC term for the Covenant's most deadly weapon in their fleet arsenal.

"Target the injured ship first Construct, then move onto the two remaining ships."

"Understood," the A.I, responded.

Under Cortana's direction, the Energy Particle Beam, which was almost like a ship's version of the rifle the Jackal's carried for high-accuracy shooting, quickly ripped through the damaged Brute

ship, cutting through its main reactor and resulting in a quick detonation that ripped the ship apart from the inside.

Without preamble Cortana changed the weapons direction, slicing through another Brute ship from end-to-end.

"Charge engines to fifty percent output and bring us along the heading zero five four," the Arbiter said. He noted as an aside that the rear thrusters were still powered, and ready to be activated again.

As he expected, before Cortana could eliminate the last Brute ship, it managed to fire off one last salvo as Honor Without Mercy's Energy Particle Beam cut through it.

Will the same maneuver work twice? the Arbiter thought as the Brute ship's last-ditch salvo raced towards them. As the distance closed the Arbiter repeated what he had done before.

"Activate rear thrusters!" he bellowed.

Honor Without Mercy shook violently and many of the Elites on the bridge were thrown to the ground. The Arbiter stared in disbelief however, as the rear thrusters had failed to activate.

"Thrusters offline, power grid overload detected," Cortana informed them.

Damn! Without any Hunagok aboard the thrusters can't sustain such abuse. They need to be maintained around the clock. How could I have forgotten?

"Divert and split all power between the engines and the shields. Get us moving and away from here. Deploy counter-measures and try to bring us out of the line of fire!" the Arbiter hurriedly ordered. Even with the combined efforts of Cortana and the crew, Honor Without Mercy had moved only a few thousand miles when the shots fired from the last Brute ship slammed into them. The shields flared and for a moment the Arbiter thought they might hold, but that hope was dashed and two streams of concentrated plasma fire slammed into the rear of Honor Without Mercy. The ship was rocked heavily, but it was otherwise unharmed. It would appear that the distance between the two ships had decreased the efficiency of the Brute ship's attack.

The bridge was silent as those aboard attempted to collect themselves after the jarring effects when the shots impacted the ship. The Arbiter climbed to his feet and checked each display intently, and was relieved to see that no other ships were present. He could feel the eyes of many of the crew on him, and he fought the urge to let out a breath of relief.

"If we had been in a UNSC ship those shots would have torn us apart," the Demon said off to the side. The Arbiter turned and saw that the human was not looking at him, but was instead looking at the displays. It was then the Elite realized the Demon had merely been making an observation, not a judgment.

"Slip Space whisper detected," Cortana announced. "One target; it appears to be a small craft. Something tells me this is what those

Brute ships were waiting for."

"Prepare to engage it regardless," the Arbiter said. "I don't wish to take any chances."

"Signal identified, its call sign is the Attrition. You wouldn't happen to know this ship would you?" Cortana asked.

The Arbiter was only momentarily surprised after hearing the name.

"It is the personal ship of High Councilor Pondomee," he replied. "He is the representative of the Sangheili on Danrun."

"Well then, how about we go say hi?"

The UNSC HighCom Facility in Sydney, Australia had a short history within the military. It had been built seven years before the Covenant's arrival in the Sol System, and those stationed at the military base could often sum up their job title with one word. Boring.

Despite the UNSC tag, the facility was packed to the brim with ONI officials and agents who used the 'Hive', a massive base built three kilometers below the Earth's surface, as their home of operations. Working with interconnected networks around Earth, ONI agents were able to have a tight grip over all the information that was released or kept hidden from public eyes.

The ONI offices were also charged with intercepting and decrypting any messages sent forth from other Installations within Earth, as well as anywhere in the known Universe. While oftentimes the messages were quite uninteresting, every so often something arrived that would immediately set off alarms and a meeting among the Admiralty and Section III would be called.

Commander Miranda Keyes was on her way to such a meeting. She had been visiting Sergeant Johnson in the infirmary, and had also considered checking in on Spartan's -058, -104 and -043 but the call for a general assembly had eliminated those thoughts.

As she strode through the narrow corridors of the 'Hive' her hands nervously smoothed out her uniform. Absently she patted her pocket and felt the medal Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood had awarded to her father posthumously. Even though the medal had only been in her possession for no more than three weeks, she had already begun to think of it as a good luck charm.

Captain Jacob Keyes was a legend within the UNSC, and Miranda Keyes consistently felt the eyes of every officer around her. They judged her based on her father's legacy, and she was well aware that she fell far short when compared to him. Despite this she was not bitter towards her father's success as a Captain, but instead felt pride.

Miranda had grown up a military brat, traveling from base to base around the galaxy, until her mother passed away around her tenth

birthday. At that time she was sent back to Earth to live with distant relatives, while her father continued his climb through the UNSC ranks and became the man that was hallowed within the entire military organization. The sparse visits from her father over the years had been one of the few things Miranda had come to treasure in life, and the eventual news of his death, only one week after she graduated from Norwich Naval Academy, had been one of the hardest blows dealt to her.

With the constant assurance of his posthumous award being with her, Miranda felt that her father was always watching over her. She may not measure up to him just yet, but some day she would.

Giving a final adjustment to her tunic, Miranda Keyes stepped past the double-set of doors and entered the Council Room.

"Commander Keyes, good of you to join us, please take a seat," General Strauss greeted her, his voice somewhat strained. Miranda stopped briefly before deciding to sit at the far corner of the large table, where she would hopefully go unnoticed. There were far too many politically motivated members of this board for her to contend with. The only reason she had been invited to the meeting was because of her involvement with the events that transpired on Delta Halo.

"We'll be getting to the point of this meeting as soon as Colonel Ackerson decides in his own good time to arrive."

There were some thin chuckles around the table but overall no one said a word. Tense silence filled the room and Miranda had the sudden urge to excuse herself so she could use the washroom. Thankfully Colonel Ackerson arrived only a few moments later.

"I apologize for my lateness," Ackerson said to the room as he took his usual seat near the head of the table, showing more humility than Miranda had ever seen him use.

General Strauss nodded once and the lights inside the room suddenly switched off, and a holo-panel was activated in the center of the table. There was distortion of the video for only a few seconds before it cleared. Miranda noticed first that it was a personal video log, but the bottom-right hand corner of the feed, which would typically read out the soldier's name, unit, and identification number, was missing, and in place was the symbol "S-III".

"We received this recording half an hour ago, and judging from the dating on the feed, it took almost three days to arrive," General Strauss informed the gathered officers. "It was sent from coordinates that are synonymous with the area where Delta Halo along with the Covenant city of High Charity was destroyed."

Miranda felt a near silent collective gasp rise throughout the room at that information. She returned her gaze to the video feed, a new sense of urgency around it.

The recording showed the inside of a cockpit, and Miranda instantly recognized it as a frigate. There was a flurry of dialogue being shouted out amongst its occupants.

"Damnit! Activate the Slip Space drive; get us the fuck out of here!"

A soldier whom Miranda recognized as an ODSI shouted. "Those bastards are gonna ram us!"

"The Slip Space drive is disabled," the pilot said, her voice belaying the obviously tense situation. "That hit to our portside from one of their ships must have taken it out."

"Brace yourselves!" the soldier whose view they were all watching bellowed out.

In a few seconds the recording suddenly shook violently, and many surprised shouts were sounded. The soldier fell to the deck and stayed there, motionless as the feed slowly corrected itself.

"Jesus Christ did that thing hit us?" the ODSI from before asked shakily.

"Hulls three through twelve breached," the copilot announced.

The soldier pulled himself off the ground and the recording changed from just watching the deck to the back of the cockpit, where the ODSI was looking behind him into the outer areas of the frigate.

"Spartans check in," the soldier they were viewing ordered. A few moments passed and he repeated the order. "Shit, I'm heading down there to check out what's wrong. Try to move us into the debris from the installation."

The sounds of the cockpit slowly faded as the recording began to shake, showing those watching that the soldier was running. Several of the hulls he passed through were on fire, and technicians were fighting to put the flames out.

It wasn't long before Miranda could see that he had reached the breached hulls. The doors slid open and the soldier peered inside. What he saw made the soldier curse. It took a moment for the smoke to start to billow out, but when it did those watching the recording could make out what the soldier had seen.

The parasitic forms of six other soldiers that had been consumed by the Flood were inside the room, and they were moving towards him at a tremendous speed. The rifle in the soldier's hands barked out as he fired a burst into his former comrades, and he got onto the ship's com net.

"The ship has been breached; all armed personnel head for deck seven and assist in clearing out the enemy. I repeat, the ship has been breached, all arms out. Fuck!"

One of the parasitic forms burst through the flames and knocked the soldier to the ground. A grunt of pain was emitted from the soldier even as he kicked the deformed legs of the creature out from underneath it and slammed his fist into its chest cavity. With effort he pulled his hand free, and in his grasp was one of the infectious forms of the Flood that all the members of the council could recognize. Crushing his hand into a fist the infectious form exploded.

The soldier quickly grabbed for his discarded rifle but was thrown to

the ground once more as two more parasitic forms emerged from the flames. They descended upon the soldier and the last image before the feed was disrupted was one of the mutilated arms of the infected soldier slamming downward.

If Miranda had thought the silence was thick before, once the recording shifted to nothing but black, the atmosphere was near oppressive.

The lights returned, and Miranda cast a discreet glance around the room. The majority of those sitting around the table were ghostly pale, while General Strauss was the only one that had retained his earlier demeanor, though he did appear quite tense.

Colonel Ackerson was immobile at his seat, his eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open uselessly.

"At first it was thought that this was sent in from a ship that had somehow survived the destruction of Delta Halo and High Charity, but after a routine check of our databanks, the ship's I.D. number was identified as belonging to one Colonel James Ackerson," General Strauss said, slowly turning to look at the shocked Colonel. "Perhaps you'd care to explain what exactly that ship was doing there."

Why on Earth would Colonel Ackerson send a frigate to the wreckage of Delta Halo? After Cortana destroyed High Charity and the Halo Installation, there was nothing left. The only thing that could have survived would be the Flood.

Colonel Ackerson worked his mouth noiselessly as if trying to remember how to speak.

"Iâ€|Iâ€|"

Before Ackerson could flounder any longer, the front entrance of the council room burst open and two UNSC Marines entered.

"Goddamnit this is a secure briefing!" General Strauss erupted. The Marines were only momentarily taken aback by his anger before saluting quickly and continuing towards the table.

"Our apologies General, but Fleet Admiral Hood has sent an operation-immediate from the Cairo Station, requesting he be patched through to the council immediately," one of the Marines explained as he accessed a small computer panel on the table. The blank video feed on the holo-panel was quickly replaced with the image of Lord Hood.

"I'm glad I was able to catch everyone in one place," he said by way of greeting, before turning serious. "I thought I'd best check in with you General Strauss about an interesting situation that has developed."

"What's the problem Admiral?" General Strauss asked.

"A UNSC frigate appeared at the edge of the system a little over an hour ago. Our request for their call sign and status has gone unheeded, and their course is set to bring them straight through the defense grid."

Every set of eyes in the council suddenly shifted back onto Colonel Ackerson. For his part he tried his best not to squirm under the scrutiny.

"Have any scans picked up life signs?" General Strauss questioned.

"There's several, and they are all registered within the UNSC, but something's different," Lord Hood replied uneasily. "The life signs areâ€|overlapping."

"What do you mean?" Strauss asked, confused.

"Typically when we ping a ship to identify those on board, we get a reading from the neural implants one at a time, but when we do so with this frigate each reading comes simultaneously. What this means I can't say."

General Strauss sighed for a moment, massaging his temples with his fingers.

"Regardless of whatever may be on board Admiral, I believe it would be best if you take it out."

Before Admiral Hood could acknowledge the order, Colonel Ackerson slammed his palms upon the table and shot to his feet.

"Do not destroy that ship!" he protested sharply. General Strauss turned to him incredulously.

"If you by chance missed what we just saw on that recording Colonel, may I remind you there's a chance it's carrying a bunch of Flood parasites."

"General that ship is carrying almost ten years worth of Special Weapons Research and Development," Ackerson said intently. "If you destroy that ship everything I've worked for in the past decade will be wasted!"

Miranda could only stare helplessly as the room suddenly degraded into a full out shouting war between its members. Those who wanted the ship destroyed and those that wanted to know what the hell Ackerson had on that frigate.

This can't beâ€|

"Colonel that ship needs to be destroyed!" General Strauss stressed. "If the Flood is indeed in control of that frigate and they land on Earth there's no telling how much damage they could inflict."

"You'll condemn my Spartans to death?" Colonel Ackerson raged. "I seem to recall there was never talk about sacrificing Dr. Halsey's freaks, so why are you willing to do so with my soldiers?"

"Spartans?" General Strauss asked confused. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"General I need an answer about this frigate," Admiral Hood urged.

"In a couple of minutes it will be inside the defense grid."

"The Special Weapons Program I designed for the fleet was only a small part of my work General," Colonel Ackerson said. "The Spartan-III Project was my trump card, and I sent them to Delta Halo to retrieve Flood samples, so I could integrate Flood DNA into their immune systems, which would have the effect of giving them regenerative properties."

"That's nonsense!" General Strauss countered before turning to Admiral Hood's image. "Admiral I want that frigate destroyed."

"Aye aye sir," Hood responded, and his image disappeared for a moment. He quickly returned.

"Target eliminated."

Miranda felt the breath she had been holding in slowly slip out of her, and she slumped back into her seat.

"You fools," Colonel Ackerson said angrily. "You've just destroyed the one chance we had to win this war."

General Strauss quickly turned to Ackerson and, surprising everyone in the room, slammed his fist into the Colonel's face. Ackerson stumbled backwards and fell, dragging his chair down with him.

"You will consider yourself under arrest Colonel, for gross insubordination and treason," General Strauss said, his voice carrying a dangerous edge. "Say one more word and I'll have these Marines escort you to the holding cells."

There was a relative calm in the room as General Strauss nursed the hand he had used to strike Ackerson.

"General," Admiral Hood said cautiously.

"What is it Admiral?" Strauss asked, his voice sounding fatigued suddenly.

"We're detecting multiple Slip Space ruptures," the Admiral explained, and then his voice took on a strained edge. "They're, inside, the defense grid."

The calm was shattered, and the entire council room erupted with shouts of protest and disbelief.

"Quiet!" General Strauss demanded. "Admiral give us a visual."

Without a reply Admiral Hood's features faded and were replaced with an outboard camera view from Cairo Station. The tell-tale signs of ships emerging from Slip Space were seen, and in a few seconds several Covenant Assault Carriers emerged.

"Scramble the Longsword squadrons," Admiral Hood's voice could be heard ordering. "Do whatever you can to keep those ships from landing on Earth!"

Miranda Keyes could only watch in disbelief, as the Covenant ships

quickly passed by the MAC stations, and headed straight for Earth.

"Damn! They're through the grid, General I recommend you sound the alarm!" Admiral Hood paused. "Wait, no life signs detected aboard those cruisers."

Oh my God. How could this have happened. How did they find us?

"Longsword squadrons scrambled, they're attacking the ships as we speak," Admiral Hood informed them. A long pause occurred where not a sound was heard from anyone.

"One of the carriers is down, it crash landed in eastern Africa."

A heavy knot seemed to form in Miranda's stomach, and she pressed a hand gently to the affected area. She felt sick to her stomach.

"The Longsword pilots are reporting that they've got a visual of something exiting the downed assault carrier. They don't know what it is. General," Hood said intently, "it's happened."

The Flood have found Earth!

Author's Notes: Wow, I did not see that coming. Looks like Ackerson's little assignment has backfired big time.

Let me know what you think.

19. The End of a War Chapter 18

Author's Notes: Not much to say, other than 'Read and Enjoy'.

I suppose I should cover a certain factoid about this story though. There is no romance here. The Master Chief is forty one years old, and Janissary James is seventeen. I'm not that much of a pervert. The relationship between these two characters is deeper than some simple contrived romance. If you want to classify it, though I wouldn't recommend you do that, it would be as Father and Daughter. Read between the lines, there's plenty of symbolism in scenes with Jan and the Chief together, you just have to look closer.

Another interesting thought. Way back in Chapter 15 I think? When ONI informed the Arbiter that he would be put on trial for crimes against humanity once the Covenant Human War was over? Well it wasn't the entire Covenant that would be put on trial. The Arbiter only agreed to allow himself to be tried for his actions. Any and all other Covenant members are more than likely going to go free, though I'm betting several other high-ranking officials will be put on trial as well.

Since its been awhile I'll remind everyone of a small fact that you may have forgotten, and one I would most certainly not blame you for doing so. Fred, Will, and Linda are all incapacitated in the HighCom Facility Hospital, which is located several miles from the military

'Hive' or base, whatever you prefer. The room number they are in is G14. Remember that now. G14.

Also, there is a fair amount of foul language in this chapter (use your imagination as to why...), so consider yourselves warned. This is probably the hardest to stomach chapter, but its necessary to get the emotion across. I'm not much for writing gory scenes, but when the situation arises, I pull it off with a flair. So I'd say for those that are squeamish, this chapter would most certainly fall into the 'R' rated category.

And yes, I know this chapter is huge, but I'm sure that's just the way you guys like it right?

****The End of a War****

****Chapter 18****

****Salvation Lostâ€|****

It had only been a few days since the air raid sirens were silenced. The civilians on Earth slowly began to slip back into a normal state of life, albeit with the constant urge to look towards the sky, and wonder just when the sirens would be sounded once again. As much as ONI and Section III wished for the true state of humanity's survival a secret, the destruction of the Outer Colonies, and the systematic approach towards Earth had given away mankind's fate.

With this mindset, the reemergence of Covenant battle ships in the skies came as no great surprise to those on Earth. It was not until leaked footage of what was onboard those Covenant ships that the civilian population realized that something was different this time.

The parasitic life forms were different from any of the documented Covenant species that ONI provided, and when no explanation was produced from the Office of Naval Intelligence, widespread panic much greater then when the first Covenant ships appeared gripped the planet.

Janissary James was witness to this fact, as she had been sitting inside a caf   a few miles from the HighCom facility in Sydney, Australia. Under Commander Keyes' direction, Jan had been put up in an apartment building in downtown Sydney, where she was within a reasonable distance from the 'Hive'.

Keyes had explained to her that while Jan was probably privy to more classified information than many of the political leaders on Earth, she was still a civilian and as such couldn't be allowed inside the base any longer. This hadn't bothered Jan much at first, seeing as how without the Master Chief around, and Commander Keyes constantly attending meetings with Section III, she had not felt very welcome inside the base. Now that a few days had passed however, Jan had come to realize just how boring it could be sitting around and doing nothing. It had taken awhile for public areas to open up again, and when they did the sparse crowds had ensured her that she was nearly the only person up and walking about. Solitude was a feeling Jan was becoming far too familiar with lately, and she had nearly welcomed the air raid sirens as she sat in the caf  ; her head slumped forward on the table.

There had been a few confusing moments, much like when she had first heard the sirens, back when she was talking with Gilly and Gladys, but she decided that there was really nothing she could do right now. Running back to the apartment Commander Keyes had rented for her would just mean she'd be sitting around inside. At least at the cafÃ© she'd have a little human interaction.

The employees in the cafÃ© had been distraught when they heard the sirens, and a few of them even ran from the place of business.

Jan sighed as she pushed away from the table, getting to her feet and walking slowly over to the television and turning it on to the nearest news network. On her way back over to the table at which she was sitting, Jan grabbed a crÃ©me dispenser from a nearby tabletop, adding the liquid to her latte as she turned her attention to the news anchor speaking.

As the anchorman spoke in an excited tone, explaining the crash landing that one of the Covenant cruisers suffered in eastern Africa, Jan absently stirred her drink with a finger. The view of the anchorman faded, and was replaced with live feed from the event that had prompted the newscast.

What the hell?

Jan felt her body freeze as she watched the screen, which showed the downed Covenant cruiser. The ship had been damaged heavily, and the large destroyed portions of the ship were numerous. It appeared as if nothing would have survived such a traumatic landing, but the video feed which was from a Longsword fighter, showed something spilling out from the ship.

As the pilot maneuvered his ship for a closer look, the words of the Master Chief, speaking with the Arbiter suddenly came back to her. Before the Spartan had removed her from _Honor Without Mercy_, she had been privy to a conversation between the two warriors.

The majority of the conversation had been on topics she had no real comprehension of, but one comment made by the Arbiter had caught her attention.

"We must be prepared for the event that the parasite leader was not killed."

The Flood were something Jan hadn't known of before meeting the Master Chief, and even then the information she had received from the Spartan and Commander Keyes was very limited. The only information she had been able to glean from the two was that the creatures were created by the Forerunner, and they were the reason the Halo Installations had been built.

As her gaze remained riveted to the screen, Jan had the sudden notion that perhaps sitting in the cafÃ© was perhaps not the best place to be at the moment. Returning to the drab apartment however, was an equally less attractive notion.

Why is it that whenever something bad happens I'm everywhere but where I want to be?

The incessant vibration of her chatter startled Jan from her reverie. Mechanically she retrieved the device from her pocket and answered it.

"Hello?" she said.

"Where are you?" a gruff voice greeted her from the other end. It took her a moment to place the voice, and then she remembered. The Sergeant from on board the Covenant ship, the one who had his arm reattached. Why on Earth would he be calling her?

"At a café," she replied.

"Pay for your coffee, girl, and then wait outside," the Sergeant ordered, and Jan heard the audible click as the connection was severed. A few moments of indecision followed before Jan slid her card beneath the small icon displaying her total charges in the center of the table, and got to her feet. With a short glance behind her at the terrified patrons and employees, Jan stepped out of the café, and onto the deserted downtown Sydney streets. Once outside she needed to wait only a few minutes before the sound of a solitary engine appeared from behind her.

Jan had seen a M12G1 LAAV Warthog before, but never in person. The imposing Gauss cannon situated in the back of the vehicle was unmanned, but even so Jan felt the urge to duck back into the café as the Warthog pulled up beside her. Sergeant Johnson was at the wheel, and the passenger seat was empty.

"Get in," the sergeant said. Without a word Jan climbed in beside him. As Johnson pulled away from the curb and spun the Warthog around, he took a moment to give Jan a once over.

"Um, do you think you might be able to tell me just what's going on?" Jan asked, feeling uncomfortable under Johnson's scrutiny.

"We had a hell of a time tracking you down," Johnson said, as if he hadn't heard Jan at all. "Commander Keyes gave us the address to the apartment she set you up with, and when you weren't there I had to contact an old friend in the Signal Corps to find your number. You're lucky he was able to set me up with the number, otherwise you'd be stuck in the city."

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Back to the HighCom Facility. it's the safest place on Earth right now. Every city in the world is getting locked down. Covenant cruisers packed to the gills with Flood are crashing all over the planet. The Marines are being scrambled to start cleaning them up. If even one city gets infected, we're really going to be shit out of luck."

"I want to help," Jan said sternly. Johnson turned shortly and gave her an incredulous stare.

"Listen girl, the Flood ain't like the Covenant. What they do to you makes getting roasted alive by the Covies seem like sweet mercy," Sergeant Johnson said, one hand unconsciously rubbing at his neck.

"Please, don't leave me behind, I can fight," Jan earnestly pleaded. The thought of sitting back, as another battle raged on her planet brought forth thoughts of the Master Chief and her father. The warrior fighting to save humanity, and a man who had given his life to save his daughter.

I don't want to be protected anymore.

A short laugh came from Johnson as he swung the Warthog onto the freeway. Traffic was nonexistent as the air raid sirens blared.

"Commander Keyes was right, you really do have some guts. Guess that's why the Chief actually put up with you," Johnson said, and his face settled into impassiveness once more. "If you really want to help, then I know where you could do some good."

Jan was about to inquire as to where that might be, but Johnson turned his attention back to the road and Jan knew that the subject was closed.

_He's about as hard-nosed as I thought he would be, _Jan thought as her gaze slipped from the passing buildings to Johnson's arms, which were currently gripping the steering wheel of the Warthog.

Its almost like his arm was never separated at all.

"There's still some stiffness, and it can hurt like a sonofabitch at times, but aside from that I've got no complaints," Johnson said, startling Jan. She glanced up at his face and saw that the Marine hadn't even taken his eyes from the road once.

"Um, can I ask how it was still able to be reattached?" Jan asked nervously. "Cortana said I didn't have the clearance to know when we were aboard the ship."

Johnson remained silent for a long moment, and Jan thought that he was going to ignore the question when he suddenly spoke.

"Eleven years ago I was on Paris IV when the Covenant decided to drop by. They weren't interested in glassing the planet right off the bat, so the Navy sent the Marines out to be ready and waiting for when the Covenant began deploying planet-side. It just so happens that my squad was situated exactly where the Covenant wanted to be. We put up a good fight, but they came in too fast. Three hours into the battle it was over, and we were pulling out. Me and this skinny guy, Private Hiate I think his name was, he was a mean sonofabitch that really knew how to fuck a Covie over with a knife. We ambushed a Covenant squad and managed to steal a crate of plasma grenades."

"I was covering the company's retreat and I must have used every last grenade in that damn crate. By the time I was loaded onto the ship and had bootlegged it out of the system, I was sick as a dog from the plasma radiation I was exposed to and the medics were telling me that I had something called Boren's Syndrome. I was just a kid back then, but I knew after that little taste of action I sure as hell wasn't going to head back to Reach just so I could lie in a bed and get prodded at by doctors. I talked it over with my ell-tee and he fixed it with the Colonel that the report from the medics was lost, and had my records changed."

"The syndrome didn't kill me, so I figured I made the right decision. When Reach got attacked, and we escaped aboard the Pillar of Autumn, I knew for certain that refusing treatment was the best thing I could have done. On Halo the only thing that saved me from getting turned into one of those Flood freaks, was that my nervous system was so fucked up the little bastards couldn't create a match, so they passed me over. I didn't know this at the time, the Chief told me when we got back to Earth, he also told me that I got a little present from my run-in with the Flood as well."

The Sergeant turned and grinned at Jan, flashing a mouth of white teeth that were more prominent against his black skin.

"The Flood have a regenerative property, some scientific shit about how they can pull themselves back together even after they've been ripped apart. It would seem that that characteristic has been passed onto me now."

Jan watched Johnson, speechless after his revelation to her. What he said seemed like something out of a science-fiction novel. Then again the entire Covenant War could be described as such.

"This isn't exactly common knowledge though girl, so don't go spreading it around," Johnson added.

"My name is Jan, Sergeant," Jan bristled. Before she could continue she glanced outside the Warthog and realized where Johnson had taken her.

"The HighCom Hospital? I don't know what you're thinking but I've got about zero medical experience."

Sergeant Johnson laughed roughly and continued towards the facility.

"Don't worry, you won't find yourself at the operating table," the Sergeant said before turning somber. "If the Flood land anywhere in Australia, Jan, then there is going to be wounded. Nothing will stop the Flood's progression through the civilian population, and the injured will need every bit of help they can get. If the hospital gets hit and taken out, then people that would otherwise have lived will die."

Jan was still certain that the Sergeant thought this would be an easy way to keep her out of harm's way, but she guessed correctly that it was probably as much leeway he was willing to provide.

Johnson pulled right up the front doors leading into the hospital and let Jan out, before she turned he reached into the back and tossed her something. Jan caught the MA5B Assault Rifle smoothly as she stared at it in surprise.

"Keep yourself safe Jan, I'd hate to see what the Master Chief would do to me if he gets back to Earth and finds out I let something happen to you," Johnson said, handing her an ammo pouch along with a duffle bag to store everything in. As an afterthought he handed her a disposable chatter.

"If it looks like the Flood are going to take the hospital, call the

preset number on here. It'll take you right to my personal com channel."

Before Jan could think of anything to say in response, Johnson put the Warthog in gear and peeled away from the hospital. Still feeling bewildered, Jan watched as Sergeant Johnson slowly disappeared from view.

Well, that was unexpected, Jan speculated, her gaze dropping to the duffle bag in her hands. Realizing the incredulity of her predicament, she quickly stuffed the gun along with the ammo pouch inside of it, hoping no one had the chance to see just exactly what she was doing.

The hospital is going to have metal detectors, and something tells me if they find out I'm walking in with an MA5B along with ten or so ammo clips, they might find it a tad out of place.

Thinking quickly Jan decided to do a short walk around the facility, hoping to find the emergency entrance. It was located around the back of the building, and it was fairly busy. Obviously people had seen the news broadcast about the arrival of Covenant cruisers once again, and civilians would undoubtedly panic.

The abundance of confusion and rushed personnel allowed Jan to slip in through the entrance with ease. From there it was only a short walk to the nearest rest room. Several women were inside, and Jan's arrival with the oversized duffle bag didn't cause too much of a stir, so she discreetly popped into a stall and waited for the room to empty.

As soon as the last woman left, who took forever to retouch her makeup, Jan emerged from the stall and quickly scanned the room. Whatever advancements may have been made in interior air circulatory systems, there was still a need for a ventilation system in washrooms. Especially in a hospital, where oftentimes very sick people frequented them.

Aha! Jan spotted the vent, located above the center stall. The diameter of the vent would be just enough to accommodate the MA5B Assault Rifle and ammo pouch, but the duffle bag would need to be ditched later on.

Working swiftly Jan had removed the vent grate off without disturbing the plaster along the roof too much, and had it back in place just as the door to the washroom swung open. Smirking to herself Jan flushed the toilet and exited the stall; washed her hands and walked out of the washroom, the duffle bag now significantly lighter.

_I wonder if I could somehow swipe a set of clothes from an orderly. If I'm really going to find myself fighting hordes of parasitic monsters, something tells me a stretch cotton skirt and matching blouse isn't the best apparel, _Jan smiled to herself, turning down a random hallway and moving forward in search of a changing room.

Sergeant Avery Johnson was at the moment very unsure over mankind's future. His past involvement with the Flood had been in contained

areas, but when they had moved into High Charity, a Covenant military base, it had been only a matter of hours before tens of thousands of Covenant were infected. Earth had potentially billions of parasitic hosts. He may have been a low-brow soldier, but even he could do the math.

The Flood needed to be eliminated, and any stalling only meant more innocent civilian deaths, and in turn their deaths would become the stepping stone for an even greater army for the Flood. There was no end to the cycle, and until the last human on the entire planet was infected, the parasite would not stop. Like a plague from biblical times, the Flood would consume humanity.

Christ, if I take any more of this stress I'm going to become a basket case.

Shaking his head ruefully, Johnson pulled the warthog to a stop outside of the HighCom facility and stepped out of the vehicle. Instead of entering the facility, he accessed the communications frequency for Captain Keyes' replacement frigate, _Lewis Puller_ which was named after the famous Lieutenant General Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller of the United States Marine Corps. The _Lewis Puller_, a Halcyon-class cruiser, was much in the same design as _The Pillar of Autumn_.

In recognition of her services at Delta Halo, and the extermination of the Covenant fleet in the Sol System, Fleet Admiral Hood had granted Miranda Keyes the rank of Captain. The appointment reeked of favoritism, but Johnson knew the promotion was deserved. Miranda Keyes had performed in the same manner as her father had in the face of overwhelming odds, and while the promotion might have been premature, it wouldn't necessarily matter if they couldn't fight off the Flood.

"This is Sergeant Johnson requesting immediate dust-off and return to the _Lewis Puller_. Lock onto my coordinates and send a Pelican," he ordered over the private com channel with the cruiser.

Half an hour later, Johnson was stepping off the Pelican and onto the deck of the _Lewis Puller_'s docking bay. Flight attendants and technicians set toward the Pelican, intent on servicing the ship.

"Is Captain Keyes on the bridge?" Johnson asked one of the passing technicians, who gave him a short nod before returning to his duties. Johnson didn't blame the Navy tech for wanting to get back to work. Right now he'd kill for something to take his mind off the thought that the Flood were on Earth.

Hitching a ride on a service warthog, Johnson passed through the extensive structure of the cruiser. The ship had been pulled from the UNSC naval graveyards and been restored only a year ago, and Johnson observed much of the ship with a critical eye.

_It looks a hell of a lot better than the Autumn did when the UNSC dumped it on Captain Keyes back on Reach. The jackass's running this army must have realized that giving ships about to fall apart from the inside, to skilled commanders isn't exactly the best way to win a war. _

Shit, if they would have taken a few more months work on the Autumn maybe Captain Keyes could've been able to fight the Covenant off before landing on Halo.

Sergeant Johnson winced slightly to himself. Thinking about what could have been was a good way to get his ass blown away. Captain Keyes was dead, and nothing anyone could have done would change that. Not even the Master Chief and Cortana were able to save him.

The driver of the warthog dropped Johnson off near one of the service elevators that would take him into engineering, and from there he would need to traverse through another few kilometers of hulls and access ways before he arrived on the bridge.

As he made the trip, Johnson mused at the back of his mind that whoever had originally designed the Halcyon-class of cruisers must have really wanted to keep the soldiers stationed on them in shape. The number of times a Navy tech or a Marine must have had to walk the circumference of the ship in a single day was numerous.

The insides of the ship were a flurry of activity, even though Johnson knew that there had yet to be a standing order to engage the Covenant cruisers still in the air. Three more had touched down in Kenya, where the first cruiser had crash landed, and the remaining ships were simply flying around. General Strauss and Admiral Hood had ordered the ships to be destroyed, but the enemy ships had been firing the massive plasma cannons as warning shots to any ships that got too close. For now the UNSC cruisers had backed off, keeping a safe distance while the Covenant cruisers circled over the African continent.

Nobody wants to take the chance and shoot one of the cruisers down, just in case it hit's a populated city. The Flood must have figured this out, cause they've been circling over Nairobi and Kampala for hours now with the rest of their cruisers.

The brass don't know why the Flood haven't turned the plasma turrets onto the cities yet. They ain't realized that the Flood won't take the chance and destroy so many potential hosts, not unless they don't got a choice.

As a mere Sergeant, Johnson hadn't been given many opportunities to see the bridge of UNSC cruisers. That right was typically saved for the Commander or Captain, and the Navy personnel that operated the ship's weapons, navigational equipment, and life systems. The mystique that surrounded the singular room was shattered to some degree when Johnson stepped through the hallway that led into the bridge.

While Sergeant Johnson may not have been expecting a room filled with Roman statues and archaic fountains, he was at least anticipating some amount of flourish. Instead he was greeted with a substandard UNSC halcyon designed room. If it weren't for the outer bay window, and the animated radar display, the bridge could have been mistaken for any other maintenance hanger.

Captain Miranda Keyes was staring out the front bay window, which was currently giving a view of the Atlantic Ocean. Johnson marched purposely towards her still form and stopped a few feet from her. His footsteps were loud, and Keyes turned when she felt him come to a

stop.

"Reporting as ordered ma'am," Johnson said with an impassive look on his face. He felt the urge to salute, but knew the Navy regulation prohibited salutes while indoors.

"Sergeant Johnson," Keyes acknowledged with a smile. "Did you get Jan back to the base?"

"Yes ma'am," Johnson replied, knowing it wasn't much of a lie.

Nodding absently Keyes turned back to stare out the bay window.

"Admiral Hood contacted the bridge a few moments before you arrived," Keyes said. "He's ordering that we prepare a company of Marines to deploy groundside where the Covenant cruisers touched down and begin the extermination."

Turning, Captain Keyes moved to her left and accessed the radar display. With a few commands it showed a video feed of a downed cruiser lying in charred rubble.

"The first cruiser that crash landed seemed like it was intent on landing in this exact location," Keyes explained. "I'm sure you'll recall that the Covenant also desired to land here."

"New Mombasa?" Johnson asked, confused. "But the whole city's nearly been wiped out when the Covenant hauled ass out of here and headed for Delta Halo."

"Indeed," Keyes replied. "But whatever it is the Prophet of Regret wanted to find there, it seems the Flood are interested in it as well."

Pain suddenly lanced up Sergeant Johnson's arm, making him gasp shortly. A tingle of anticipation and apprehension filled his body, and Johnson had to steady himself.

Shit, what the hell was that? Felt like somebody stepped on my grave.

"Sergeant?" Keyes questioned, concerned. "Are you all right?"

"Yes ma'am, just felt a little woozy for a second," Johnson remarked, mentally shaking the cobwebs from his mind. "I was about to say, I'll volunteer to go with the company of Marines."

Keyes looked at Johnson for a moment, visibly debating his request.

"All right, but I expect you to keep me abreast on the situation."

Johnson smiled lightly.

"Will do."

Ugh, how could anyone actually get used to this stuff?

Jan shifted uncomfortably as the thick material of the scrubs she had donned after discovering a female changing room started to chafe her thighs. After getting changed, she had silently made her way back to the waiting room of the hospital, and taken one of the very few empty seats. The hospital was busy, and Jan was certain if she could just keep herself from causing anyone to notice her, she could wait out however long she'd need to stay at the hospital inside the waiting room.

Glancing around, Jan saw that the majority of the people sitting around were families, mainly young children with their mothers. There weren't many men, something Jan immediately took notice of.

Guess the UNSC is more interested in conscripting males. Not that its much of a surprise.

With a sigh Jan slumped back, letting her head fall against the wall located behind her. Closing her eyes she tried her best to block everything out; the war, the noise, the memoriesâ€|all of it.

After a few moments she realized the futility of it, and was about to sit back up when she felt something tugging at her leg. Cracking one eye open, Jan peered down at the small girl beside her. The girl's dark auburn hair and black eyes were a sharp contrast to the brightly colored clothes she was wearing.

"Umm," the little girl released Jan's pant leg when she saw that she had Jan's attention. The child fidgeted slightly as she suddenly appeared nervous.

"Can I help you?" Jan asked, careful to keep her tone light, and not let her fatigue seep through.

"Umm," the girl said once more. "Big sis, do you work here?"

_Eh? 'Big sis'? _Jan thought, confused. She stared back at the girl for a moment before she realized what the child meant. _Its just a way of addressing me, like how I used to call Dad's friends 'Uncle'._

"I sure do," Jan lied with a smile. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Oooh boy, here's hoping she doesn't blow my cover.

"My mom got in an accident yesterday, and my neighbors brought me here, but I went to go get some juice and now I can't remember what room she's in," the girl explained quickly, her eyes earnest as she stared into Jan's face.

Jan smiled softly at the girl as she patted her lightly on the head. Without any preamble she got to her feet, reaching one hand down to lightly grasp the girl's left hand within her own as she began to lead her out of the waiting area.

_I may regret this, but I just can't say no to a face this cute, _Jan thought as she approached the front desk.

"So, can you tell me what your name is?" Jan asked.

"Shiratori Kozue," Kozue said, her voice small as the girl fidgeted with shirt. Jan felt a smile grace her face once more, and she turned to speak with the nurse managing the desk.

"Could I get the room number for Shiratori? Her daughter wants to see her," Jan said as confidently as she could.

The nurse looked up for only a moment before accessing the terminal situated in the main nurses station.

"Shiratori Yuki, Room C34."

Giving a quick thanks to the nurse, Jan steered Kozue away from the desk and down the first corridor she saw, hoping to find some kind of indication of where an elevator might be.

"So, Kozue, what happened to your mother?" Jan asked absently, scanning a distant hallway.

"Sheâ€|she," Kozue hesitated, and Jan looked down at her, puzzled. "She got hurt."

Jan sensed there was far more to it than that, but wisely kept her mouth shut as she finally located the elevator that would take them to the third floor. They waited in silence as the elevator made its way to the ground floor. Once they were boarded Jan hit the icon that would take them to the third floor, mindful of the looks she was receiving from the other occupants of the elevator.

The moment the doors parted to reveal their stop, Jan moved off quickly, pulling Kozue with her. After a few minutes of wandering, they came to a halt outside the room bearing the indication of C34. Jan rapped her knuckle lightly against the door and, hearing no response, opened the door.

While Jan wasn't one to believe in premonitions and visions, she would have found it hard to disagree that the room automatically gave off the feeling of death and gloom. The drab olive white color seemed to only accentuate the depression the room seemed to be radiating with. Slumped on the medical bed was a woman that couldn't have been more than thirty years old, yet her face seemed aged beyond her years.

Kozue slipped her hand free from Jan's and quickly moved next to her mother, who gave no indication that she had noticed the girl.

"Mom, you didn't eat your dinner," Kozue pointed out, and Jan's eyes were drawn to the full hospital tray lying on the table next to the unmoving woman. Kozue's mother turned on her side, away from her daughter, and clutched a drawn blanket to her body. The sight of the bandages on the woman's wrists automatically changed Jan's attention away from the food, and she felt a growing sickness develop in her stomach.

Confirming her suspicions, the utensils on the food tray were made of plastic, and there were no other medical instruments in the room. Even the woman's IV tube was shortened, so as to not allow one to

wrap the tube around a vital area.

Swallowing roughly, Jan cleared her throat to get Kozue's attention. The child shouldn't see her mother like this.

"Kozue," Jan said, and waited for the girl to turn around. "How about we go get some food from the cafeteria?"

Kozue looked at Jan for a moment before turning to her mother, uncertainty written across her face.

"Kozue," Jan urged. "I'm sure your mother needs her rest, lets leave her alone for awhile."

"Okay," Kozue finally relented, and walked towards Jan, dejected. Jan quickly took the girls hand once more and lead her from the room, closing the door behind her.

Oh God.

Jan looked down at the child next to her in astonishment. Her mother had obviously tried to take her own life, but how could she do that when she had a child to take care of.

Trying to stem her thoughts, Jan led Kozue from the hospital ward and back to the elevator they had previously used. Once they reached the ground floor again, Jan followed the navigational signs that eventually led them to the hospital cafeteria. It was large enough to accommodate almost all of the patients and staff, so finding seats away from the crowd was easy. Jan used the last of the credits that Commander Keyes had lent her to pay for Kozue's food, and watched the child in silence as she ate.

"Kozue?" Jan asked, and the girl looked up from the hamburger she was devouring. "Where's your father?"

The question was hard to ask, as Jan knew that more than likely her father had been pressed into service, and perished, which would explain why her mother had decided to end her life.

"He went away, that's what Mama always said," Kozue responded, her voice light. "The aliens came while he was away though, so we had to leave."

"You're not from Earth?" Jan asked. Kozue shook her head in response.

"Nope, we used to live on Sigma Octanus IV. Papa went away to fight the aliens but they came and they attacked our town. Me and Mama hid with our neighbors, and we thought they might find us, but then the robots came."

"Robots?" Jan questioned, confused.

"Uh huh," Kozue said, nodding earnestly. "They were big, and covered in green armor. They spoke like robots and moved very fast. Some of them took Mama and me to a big spaceship that flew us away. That's how we came to Earth, they put us in these camps, but then Mama got hurt so we came to the hospital."

"I see," Jan said. "You've been through a lot haven't you?"

"I guess so," Kozue responded, uncertainly, and returned her attention to the food.

_Robots in green armor huh? _Jan smiled to herself, before remembering that three of the 'robots' were inside the very hospital she was in.

I wonder if I could persuade the guards to let me see them?

The gentle silence that had overtaken the two girls was shattered as twenty or so Marines suddenly poured in.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I need your attention please!" the Marine up front shouted. As Jan stared at him, she recognized the twin silver bars of a 1st Lieutenant on his epaulettes. He climbed up onto one of the cafeteria tables so that those at the far end could see him.

"A Covenant capital ship has just touched down a few miles outside of Sydney. ONI has set up an evacuation transport group that will get you all out of the area. Please remain calm. I ask that you drop everything. You are not permitted to take any material possessions. Just the clothes on your back. If you have any family members in this facility that are capable of being transferred, I ask that you bring them with you."

Jan got to her feet.

"What about the patients who aren't capable of being moved?"

The Marine Lieutenant looked at her, somewhat annoyed, and shook his head.

"I'm sorry but we don't have the time or the resources to ensure their safety."

"So you'll leave them here to die?" Jan asked.

"We'll be setting up our base of operations out of this hospital, if and when the Covenant come, the patients will be defended."

The flurry of activity that occurred after the lieutenant stopped speaking was impressive, and Jan decided she had best get Kozue out of the hospital as soon as possible.

Picking the girl up into her arms, she sprinted to the collected group of Marines who were addressing the somewhat panicked questions from the other people. The Lieutenant who had been speaking before was standing without anyone accosting him, so Jan dumped Kozue into his arms.

"Make sure she gets on the transports," Jan said quickly, before moving off into the crowd. The surprised questions from the Lieutenant, and the shocked cries from Kozue were quickly drowned out as Jan navigated through the dense multitude of people. The gathering before the elevators was large, despite the vast majority of people that seemed to have decided to abandon their family members incarcerated in the hospital, and were dashing out the front doors.

With a frustrated groan Jan dashed for the staircase, taking three stairs at a time as she climbed towards the third floor.

_When I was six years old, and an alien invasion was happening for the second time, only this time with parasitic creatures that will possess and wipe out the human race, I'd want my mother with me even if she was suicidal. _

Jan snorted to herself.

That's not a very far off description of Gilly actually.

The upper floors of the hospital were remarkably less crowded than the main floor, which didn't surprise Jan much. The thought of being overrun by the Covenant was probably a big incentive to leave your family members behind and try to get the hell out of the Covie's path.

Arriving back at C34, Jan threw open the door with significantly less care than before. Kozue's mother was lying on the bed, though she was at least showing some signs of life. The woman had obviously been surprised by Jan's sudden arrival.

"Get up, the Covenant is about to roll right over this hospital."

Not exactly the truth, but I don't really have the time to explain what's really coming.

Yuki simply turned away.

"I said, get up," Jan ground out, forcibly. When Yuki gave no signs of life, she marched over and ripped her blanket off the woman and upturned the bed, dumping her to the ground.

"Go away," Yuki moaned back pitifully.

"The Covenant are coming, your daughter is terrified, and you're telling me to 'Go away'?" Jan asked angrily. Stomping over to where the woman lay, Jan gripped the front of her medical gown and pulled her up.

This is for her own good.

The loud crack echoed inside the dimly lit room, and Yuki's cheek began to redden. Jan pulled the hand she had used to slap the woman across the face back to her side. The move seemed to have an effect, as Yuki stared back at Jan in fear.

"Now, you're going to get on the transports evacuating everyone right?" Jan asked, and Yuki nodded back frightfully.

Jan helped her out of the room, and quickly hunted down another medical attendee that had yet to evacuate. Jan passed Kozue's mother off to him and he helped her into a waiting elevator. Jan decided to skip the likely uncomfortable ride down the packed device and headed back down the stairs.

The Marines had obviously done their job well, as the main floor

looked noticeably less panicked, as patients and medical personnel exited the hospital through the main entrance in an orderly fashion.

It took Jan a few minutes but she managed to locate the Marine Lieutenant she had passed Kozue off to. He was standing near the entrance/exit of the hospital speaking with several other Marines as well as talking into the mouthpiece on his helmet, most likely speaking with other Marines located around the hospital.

Jan swallowed her uneasiness and quashed the growing fear building in the pit of her stomach, then marched over to where the Marines were gathered.

"Can I help you?" the Marine 1st Lieutenant asked as he saw her approach.

"Are the Flood really heading towards this hospital?" Jan asked, and almost felt a smile grace her face as she saw the Lieutenant and other gathered Marines do a double-take. The Lieutenant quickly grabbed onto Jan's arm and dragged her away from the doors and into a nearby corridor.

"How do you know about the Flood?" he asked, his tone hard. "I wasn't debriefed on the matter until a few hours ago, when the first carrier touched down in Africa."

"I have a couple friends in high places," Jan said. The Marine looked at her for a moment in confusion.

"Explain," he demanded.

Jan did a short recant of her involvement with Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson, making sure not to mention the Master Chief or the Arbiter, as she was quite sure the Marine would decide she was lying, and have her detained.

"Not many people know Sergeant Johnson enough for him to actually put his balls on the line, and if it was anyone else I'd probably say you were lying, but I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt here."

"Thank you," Jan said, sincerely. The Marine nodded briefly.

"To answer your earlier question, yes the Flood are heading towards this hospital. We presume their target is the HighCom facility, but once it goes into lockdown they won't be able to break in, so its been estimated that the parasites will move from there to this facility. Seeing as how ONI isn't being completely heartless these days they've dispatched us, 'I' Company 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Division. Unfortunately we're only at half strength, as some of my men were caught up in the action that took place on the Malta and Athens when the Covenant first decided to show up."

"So you have about seventy five men?" Jan asked.

"Right," the Lieutenant grunted, his voice showing slight surprise over her knowing the traditional size of a Marine Infantry Company.

"So that would mean you'd be willing to take any kind of help that was offered?" Jan asked, a slow smile building.

"I suppose," the Lieutenant said, his voice wary. "But unfortunately I don't have any spare weapons."

"Oh that's quite all right Lieutenant," Jan said. "I just so happened to have brought my own."

The Marine Lieutenant fought the urge to chuckle when he heard an incoming transmission over the secure battle net that had been set up. He accessed the transmission from his helmet, tuning out Jan for a moment.

Once the transmission was ended, he turned back to Jan, any amusement that had once graced his face was now gone.

"If you have weapons stored here girl, than I'd suggest you go get them. The Flood just passed the HighCom Facility without stopping. They're heading straight here."

"What have you got for me Sergeant?" Captain Keyes spoke over the communications network setup between the _Lewis Puller_ and the ground units that had been deployed to New Mombasa.

Touchdown is in five ma'am, Johnson's voice carried over the com net. You'll have a live video feed once we touch down courtesy of the helmet you forced me to where.

"Its all for the sake of documentation Sergeant Johnson," Keyes replied with a smile in her tone she knew the Marine would detect.

Yeah I hear ya, Johnson grumbled back, adding "Ma'am" as an afterthought as he switched off the com.

Miranda Keyes ran a hand briefly through her non-regulation length hair and sighed.

Three Flood-filled capital ships have touched down in and around Kenya and the rest of Africa. One more just hit near the HighCom Facility in Australia. Three others have hit in China and eastern Russia, and that's not even counting the number of ships still in flight.

If any Gods feel like bestowing a miracle on the human race, now would be the time.

"Ma'am?" one of the senior radar operatives spoke, breaking her away from her thoughts.

"What is it?" Captain Keyes asked, careful to keep the fatigue from her voice.

"We're detecting an unauthorized ship launch from eastern Australia, sensors show its destination is headed out past Earth's atmosphere."

"Give me its call sign. Run a scan and check for any human CNI signatures," Keyes ordered.

"Right away ma'am," the radar operator replied.

Just what I need, another problem.

"Call sign is KFG-102, or _The Operator_. CNI scan is complete and there's one signal aboard, though it can be presumed there is also a crew aboard. Its still active so we can presume the ship is not Flood controlled."

Why does that call sign sound so familiar?

"Run the CNI data through ONI's databanks and tell me who it belongs to."

Several tense moments passed as the radar operator carried out her latest order.

"Ackerson, James. Office of Naval Intelligence, Colonel, head of special weaponsâ€¦"

"Get me Admiral Hood now!" Keyes demanded, cutting the sailor off.

"R-Right away ma'am," he stuttered. Admiral Hood's voice filled the bridge instantly.

'Something I can do for you Captain Keyes?'

"Sir, a UNSC-class frigate is preparing to exit Earth's atmosphere for an unknown destination. It has been confirmed that Colonel James Ackerson is aboard."

'Ackerson?' Hood's voice carried his disbelief. 'Thank you Captain Keyes, I'll deal with this situation.'

"Aye aye sir," Keyes replied. She turned to the radar operator that had originally passed on the information.

"That was some quick work," she said with a smile. "Good job."

Next Miranda Keyes moved back to the head of the bridge where she had a view of the video feed that would be operational once Sergeant Johnson and the other Marines were on the ground in New Mombasa. The moment the feed appeared, Keyes heard Admiral Hood's voice over the personal com channel between the _Lewis Puller_ and Cairo Station.

'Captain Keyes, be advised that Colonel Ackerson's vessel, _The Operator_ has an onboard cloaking device. We have since lost visual contact. It is believed that the fugitive will attempt to enter Slip Space. If he does so, all UNSC ships navigating at a high enough altitude will have their communications disrupted.'

"I understand sir, thank you for the information," Keyes replied. Her gaze moved back to the display that would be activated in a few minutes.

What the hell is Ackerson thinking? _The bastard better not make a jump while the Marines are clearing New Mombasa._

The steady thrum of the Pelican's thrusters lulled Sergeant Johnson into a relaxed state. The seasoned Marine let his eyes drift close as he listened to the chatter between the other soldiers.

His arm had begun to grow numb soon after he and the others departed from the _Lewis Puller_. The brief pain he experience aboard the bridge while talking with Captain Keyes hadn't resurfaces as of yet, but Johnson felt as if it was constantly there. The dull ache that seemed to rise throughout his entire right arm.

Grimacing to himself, Johnson forces his eyes open and glanced out the open bay door of the Pelican. The wreckage of New Mombasa lay below as the squadron of Pelicans flew overtop. Staring down at the blackened Earth and shattered buildings, Johnson wondered briefly how many civilians had managed to evacuate the city before the Covenant arrived.

Shaking his head warily Johnson realized that the Prophet of Regret had decimated the city only two weeks ago. It felt like a lifetime to Johnson. Back then things had been simpler. The Covenant weren't hell-bent on killing off all life in the universe, or at least Johnson hadn't known about that back then. Fighting the Elites had been a natural urge, instead of having to fight alongside them, and probably the biggest change. There was no giant-mutant-plant-freak leading the Flood to dominion over all life.

"Hey Sarge, looks like we're heading up to the LZ."

Johnson turned his head to see a young Marine pointing out the front of the Pelican. Johnson got to his feet and marched towards to the cockpit. Peering out past the pilot, he spotted the downed Covenant cruiser. Surprisingly it looked to be in much better shape than he thought it would be, which leant a little more evidence to Captain Keyes' theory that the Flood specifically chose New Mombasa as a landing zone.

The pilot turned momentarily in his seat to glance back at Johnson.

"I'll set her down a little ways away from the carrier Sarge, I don't want those little bastards climbing in here."

Nodding slightly to the pilot Johnson turned around, and looked at the assembled Marines inside his Pelican.

"We'll be put down a few clicks from the carrier. I want everyone to be alert! If even one of the infectious forms gets the drop on one of you that's it. You'll be turned into a walking freak and you'll be shot down by your own squad. So stay alert, and keep your weapons on the ready. Communication is key here people! If one squad fucks up we're all in for it."

The Pelican shuddered as the pilot lightened up on the thrusters and

leveled off with the ground. Slowly the ship began a vertical descent towards the charred ruins of New Mombasa.

Johnson marched back over to his seat, threw an impatient look at the helmet waiting for him, and then deposited it onto his head. The HUD (Heads-Up Display) reticule was easy to navigate and he activated the video feed and started an uplink to the Lewis Puller so Captain Keyes could get a first hand look at what was going on ground side.

Walking to the edge, Sergeant Johnson looked down towards their targeted LZ. It looked to be the remains of an intersection. Pieces of shattered buildings and cars were strewn about, which would make traversing the streets towards the downed cruiser that much more difficult.

When the Pelican came to a stop only four feet from the ground, Johnson turned to the other Marines in the Pelican, and activated the com channel for the other Pelicans.

"Touchdown boys, stay with your platoon and don't wander off. We need to move fast and light. Engaging the enemy is low priority for now. We've got to get to that cruiser first."

Turning Johnson grabbed a large case, nearly as wide as he was tall, and almost a foot thick. With it secured in his hands he checked to see the M6B Pistol was stuffed in the holster attached to his waist, and then grabbed the M90 Shotgun lying across his seat and swung it onto his shoulder. The only other weapon he carried was a combat knife strapped to his left leg. With that finished he turned to the inside of the Pelican bay once more.

"Its go time Marines! Let's hit 'em hard and fast!"

The gravel beneath Jan's feet crunched loudly as she lightly jogged towards the front entrance of the hospital. Overhead the clouds darkened, as if they were a reflection of the mood that had begun to descend upon the collected soldiers. The scrubs Jan had borrowed from a resident in the hospital had been replaced with a flak jacket and trousers, which had been loaned to her from Lieutenant Barnes.

After much protesting that I didn't look like a soldier wearing medical scrubs, Jan thought with a smirk

Waiting at the hospitals entrance for her was said lieutenant, and his crossed arms and stoic posture made him look like a bronzed statue. Jan jogged towards him before finally coming to a stop just inside the hospital doors.

"What could you see?" Barnes asked.

"They're moving through the residential areas, just like the Longsword pilots reported," Jan said, only slightly breathless. "There doesn't seem to be an attempt to actually enter any of the homes or buildings though."

"And? What about the Flood? Were there any infected hosts?" Lieutenant Barnes asked, keeping his tone cautious.

Jan nodded even as she shuddered internally. The Longsword squadron that had been coordinating with 'I' Company had been called off to go assist in Nairobi, where another carrier had landed. Without air support, Lieutenant Barnes had decided that unless they wanted to be caught off guard by the Flood, it would be best to send a scout down the gravel road that led into the small residential area located between the HighCom Facility and the hospital.

Volunteers had been forthcoming, but Jan felt the need to prove to them that she would be an asset, and not a liability, so with the assurance from Lieutenant Barnes that if she encountered any trouble she should run instead of trying to fight, she had set out. The residential area, which strangely enough was considered a part of Sydney despite it being almost three miles outside of the city limits, had been a short run from the hospital, and from a high ridge line lined with trees and shrubbery, Jan had observed the area.

The last report from the Longsword squadron before they departed had detailed the Flood's progression from Sydney and then past the HighCom Facility. Apparently the entire division of Marines deployed in Sydney hadn't been able to stop the Flood, or couldn't completely contain them.

The Flood had done some damage in Sydney though, the twisted and mutilated corpses rushing through the streets along with the infectious forms was tantamount to that fact. The wave of nausea Jan had felt when she first saw the infected bodies had been large, and even now, recanting on the subject was enough to make her feel ill.

"Damn," Lieutenant Barnes muttered. "How much longer until they get here?"

"Ten minutes at most," Jan said, her hands beginning to tremble slightly at the thought.

Barnes nodded as he turned to look at the entrance foyer of the hospital.

"We're going to have to stop the Flood here. The Brass don't want the Flood getting any further, so we've got orders to finish them off, or at least impede their progress enough that we can finally get some goddamn air support again. Those parasitic bastards are smart enough to move through residential areas, where they know we won't risk dropping any kind of ordnance to wipe them out," Lieutenant Barnes ranted, running a hand across his jaw.

"So what are your orders?" Jan asked. Barnes stared off into space for a few moments, before finally turning around to face her.

"There's three main entrances into the hospital. The front foyer here, the emergency entrance out back, and from the rooftop. Going in from the roof will take time, and it'll be much easier to defend than the ground floor entrances. I'd say dividing up the platoons and squads, I could place two squads up on the roof, and split the

remaining force in half, putting one at each end of the hospital," Barnes said, thinking out loud.

"Where do you want me?" Jan requested, shoving her hands into the pockets of the trousers, hoping that Barnes wouldn't notice they had been shaking.

"You're going to be staying near me," Barnes said. "You may know more about the Flood and what they do than anyone here, but fighting them is a different matter. Also I'm afraid of what Johnson might do to me should he find out I let you go off on your own."

Jan smiled at Lieutenant Barnes before moving off to where she had lain the MA5B on a countertop. She appreciated the Lieutenant's efforts at trying to make her feel more at ease, especially after seeing the Flood first hand. It was hard to place her finger on exactly what was troubling her. It wasn't the prospect of fighting an actual battle. She had seen her fair share of action onboard the Covenant fleet when the Master Chief had detonated a nuclear weapon aboard a Covenant ship.

Perhaps it was the thought of seeing others die. No matter how skilled the Marines that would defend this hospital were, it didn't change the fact that some of them, maybe even a lot of them would wind up sacrificing their lives.

It hadn't even been a month since Jan had watched her father get murdered before her. Shot to death as he lay ensnared in a trap laid by Thin Kinkle, witnessed by his daughter whom he had come to rescue. Left to bleed to death on the floor while his daughter watched, screaming her pain as she watched the one constant in her life slip away into lifelessness.

Jan felt her hands clench tightly into fists and she bit down hard on her lip.

_Shit! Goddamnit don't lose it now girl! _

"Jan?" Lieutenant Barnes' voice pierced through the haze that surrounded her and Jan spun around, careful to blink away any of the tears that had collected in her eyes.

"Yeah?" Jan responded, her voice hoarse as she fought against the lump in her throat.

"I'm going to go fill everyone else in and get everything set up. Can you keep watch here? If I'm not back by the time the Flood show up get on your chatter. I'll be here in a flash. I promise."

"Okay," Jan nodded, watching as Lieutenant Barnes collected his rifle and moved off out of the foyer. Once he was gone she turned her attention out the front doors.

It won't be long now.

"Langdon get the fuck up here!" Sergeant Johnson shouted as he fired a buckshot round through the window of the collapsed building that was currently blocking off the platoons forward progression. The

Flood had been assaulting the two Marine Companies the moment they had dismounted from the Pelicans. The rough terrain had forced the two groups onto separate paths, limiting them to communication over close personal com channels, and from the sounds of things the company opposite of Johnson's was getting a real beating from the Flood.

Private Gordon Langdon came huffing towards Johnson's position against the fallen building.

"You called Sarge?" Private Langdon asked, his voice in stark contrast to the situation. Below their position the sounds of continuous gunfire echoed throughout the city.

"Get that Jackhammer off your back and put it to use soldier! We'll be overwhelmed if we can't get by this goddamn building. Get a good view through the window here and fire off two rounds at the back wall. Don't worry about accuracy here, we just need holes big enough to fit your skinny ass through!" Johnson shouted, making sure he was heard over the gunfire.

"I'm on it!" Private Langdon shot back. He quickly dumped the webbing pack he had thrown over his shoulders and removed the M19 SSM Rocket Launcher, otherwise known as the 'Jackhammer'. Getting down to one knee he primed the weapon, making sure the shoulder guard was firmly rested against his body, and then adjusted his sights.

Sergeant Johnson positioned himself behind and off to the left of Langdon, and he watched intently over the soldier's shoulder as he let fly one rocket propelled grenade after another. The rockets screamed through the open window Johnson had indicated and passed right through the collapsed floors of the building before slamming into the far side. The advent of light into the darkened building was all the indication Johnson needed to see that his gamble had paid off.

Getting onto the com channel reserved for the company of Marines he was assigned with, Johnson informed them that the way was now open, and if they would be so kind as to join him it would be greatly appreciated.

Johnson stopped to pick up the case he had taken from on board the Pelican, and he awkwardly climbed through the window and began trenching through the interior of the building towards the large hole Langdon's shots had made in the far wall.

"What have you got in that thing Sarge? Looks big enough to carry a Warthog," Langdon commented as he joined Sergeant Johnson in the interior of the downed building. Johnson turned momentarily and flashed a grin at the Private.

"It's a little surprise I've got for the Flood. I had to get down on my knees to beg the ordnance officer on the Lewis Puller to get it."

"So that means you won't tell me huh?" Langdon asked.

"You bet your ass I'm not."

"Control your base of fire Goddamnit! Hit the big ones when they're in the open! You're wasting ammo aiming only where you think they are!" Lieutenant Barnes berated a Marine Private who had been spraying the courtyard outside the hospital foyer haphazardly with his sub-machine gun.

The Flood had wasted little time arriving at the hospital. The girl's estimate had been spot on, as he had just arrived back at the foyer with a group of Marines when the parasitic forms had shown up.

Any semblance of order and control over the battle was quickly lost, as many of the Marines opened fire blindly at the creatures, too horrified to do much else. There had been several moments where it seemed like they would be overrun, but the girl, Jan, she had managed to get everything under control.

Tables, chairs, anything that could be used to create a line of cover for the Marines had been lain out in the center of the foyer, giving the Marines a good field of view of where the Flood would be forced to enter, but also supplying a fair amount of cover if the combat forms carrying UNSC weapons were actually able to use them. Jan must have set it up quickly, but when Barnes had given it a quick once-over it looked to be in good shape. Whatever doubts he may have had about her were removed when he saw the methodical thinking she was capable of.

The confusion and fear that had gripped most of the Marines was eased when Jan opened up with her MA5B. The concentrated bursts of fire took out groups of seven to ten of the infection forms, and a steady stream of rounds sent into the chest of a combat form was enough to take one of them down. Seeing that the enemy was indeed capable of being repelled with superior firepower and a steady trigger hand, the panicking Marines calmed themselves and moved into standard positions of cover.

Half an hour into the fight things had been looking good, that is, until the Flood combat forms appeared that had been formed while the Flood moved through Sydney. The Marines there had taken a beating, and judging from the amount of weapons the combat forms possessed, the Flood wanted them to know it.

The upturned tables and other debris weren't very good at stopping bullets, and some of the Marines defending the entrance had been wounded.

Barnes had thought ahead though, and made sure a medic had been deployed to each of the three defensive zones in the hospital, and because of this not one Marine had lost their life as of yet.

No matter how hard they press, we cannot fall back, not one inch. Giving the Flood access to the many different hallways and internal ventilation would be the same as being overrun. We would be at their mercy.

"Hold the line!" Barnes shouted, even though he was certain not one of the Marines heard him. A lull in the waves of Flood gave him a chance to check up on the downed soldiers.

Two of the Marines had taken hits in the chest, and while their chest plates had caught the bullets, splintered bits of plastic and wood from the tables and chairs had managed to slice up their neck and face. Several others had been hit by bullet fragments on exposed parts of their bodies, and despite their protests that they could still fight Barnes kept them under the tight watch of the medic, who was using the hospitals near endless supply of medical tools to assist the injured Marines.

"How are we doing for ammo?" Lieutenant Barnes asked the assembled Marines, who were taking the break to catch their breath.

Aside from Jan, no soldier had more than two clips of ammunition remaining. This would cause trouble if the Flood didn't back off eventually, and judging from the parasite's tactics so far that wouldn't be happening any time soon.

Returning to the impromptu cover they were fighting behind, Barnes cast a glance at the courtyard, which was littered with torn bodies of infected human forms, and the putrid flesh of the small infectious Flood forms.

Lieutenant Barnes was about to take a moment to rest when the twisted screams of the Flood echoed into the foyer from outside once more.

"Alright boys, here they come," Barnes said, getting back into stationary firing position, kneeling down on one leg. "Remember to keep your shots controlled. Spraying wildly isn't going to work here and all its going to do is make sure you run out of ammo that much faster."

Once more the fighting resumed, near continuous fire from the line of Marines into the massive hordes of Flood that charged into the hospital foyer without delay, their speed inhuman as they rushed the line, hoping to catch a break in the bursts of gunfire and to smash through the defensive line.

In the midst of the fanatical battle, Barnes' eye caught the sight of a lone combat form approaching from down the main road. In its lone arm the creature carried a Jackhammer rocket launcher. From the range he was at, hitting the creature with an M7 would be near impossible, but Lieutenant Barnes fired nonetheless.

The creature must have sensed that getting closer would be tantamount to death, so from a range of close to a hundred yards, it raised the weapon it carried, and fired.

Barnes had hoped the shot would go wild, perhaps it would slam into the upper section of the hospital entrance, but it was not to be. The combat form's aim had been dead on, and the rocket headed straight for the Marines' position.

"Hit the dirt!" Barnes shouted, just as the rocket cleared the foyer doors, and only a mere second before it slammed into the defensive barrier that had been so hastily erected. The rocket had hit to the right of the line, only several feet from where Barnes had been kneeling.

The force of the blast was sufficient to send Barnes skidding across

the ground, his eyes darkened as the concussion blast sent stars dancing through his vision. He noted vaguely as he finally came to a stop twenty feet away from where he had originally knelt, that the sound of gunfire had stopped.

It took several moments for Barnes to gather his bearings, and he slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position, resting his back against what he presumed to be the visitor's information kiosk.

Why isn't anyone firing?

The world slowly blurred back into shape, and Barnes looked to where the twenty five Marines had been lined up, and was surprised to see that nothing was there any longer. Scattered around on the ground were the Marines, many of which weren't moving.

Near the end of the room he spotted Jan. She looked to have escaped the rocket blast unscathed, and was helping pull some of the injured Marines away, as if she could somehow get them far enough away from the Flood, who were beginning to pour in through the foyer.

Opening his mouth to yell at Jan, Barnes finally felt the first tendrils of pain wash over his body, and he groaned painfully as he looked down to where his right leg should have been. His upper thigh was shaking uncontrollably, and he became dimly aware that pieces of his femur bone had ripped through the layers of flesh, and were protruding through the skin.

Shit, where the fuck is my leg?

He spotted it shortly, just as Jan started to open fire with her assault rifle. It was lying near the torn remains of the barrier they had been using. Barnes surmised that it was much too far to retrieve before the Flood managed to get there, so he gave up on that idea.

Dammit why is Jan still shooting? Doesn't she know we're done here?

Wincing as he opened his mouth once more, Barnes turned his attention to the girl that was firing short bursts into the swarming hordes of infectious forms filling the hospital foyer.

"Get the hell out of here!" Barnes shouted as best he could. Jan turned momentarily to look at him in surprise, but quickly resumed firing.

Fuck! Goddamnit why are women so damned stubborn?

"Link up with the other teams you stupid girl! I'll finish up here, and be right behind you!" Barnes yelled, knowing his voice was beginning to crack.

Jan seemed to realize the futility of the situation and swore loudly as she finished off the magazine inside the MA5B and turned to cast one final glance at Barnes before dashing off down the far corridor.

Barnes reached down with his left arm, noting that his right arm didn't seem to be working anymore and pulled the M6-C handgun from

the holster at his side. A quick check showed him that his right arm was still intact, though a large piece of twisted shrapnel had become entwined with his upper bicep.

Using his left arm, Barnes uncomfortably chambered a round in the pistol before beginning to fire methodically into the hordes of Flood that had just cleared the large crater created by the rocket that had been fired at them.

The Flood seemed to be ignoring his presence however, and were moving towards the hallway that Jan had exited down.

That just won't due.

A lone fragmentation grenade was lying at the other end of the foyer, and the infectious forms were just about to run over it.

I was never a very good shot with this thing, but if there was ever a time God could grace me with some accuracy now would be the time.

The first two shots went awry, and Barnes was beginning to reconsider his decision when the third shot landed true, and the grenade detonated, ripping into the Flood that had planned to pass him by.

That sure got their attention

The hordes had split and a large group of the infectious forms headed towards him. Barnes aimed his handgun at them, but before he could fire, realized that there were only two rounds left in the weapon.

Turning to where the medic was crouched over an injured Marines body, Barnes spotted a group of infectious forms heading towards the soldier. The medic had only enough time to slam a serrate filled with morphine into the Marine's thigh before one of the Flood infectious forms leapt upon him, slamming a needle-like pincer into his neck.

Barnes aimed and fired, watching as the medic's head snapped to the side as Barnes' shot his home.

Better to die quick than go through whatever these little fuckers would put you through.

The infectious forms were almost upon him, and Barnes looked contemplatively at the pistol in his hands as the screams of the other Marines slowly died out as the Flood consumed them.

One shot left. Just like the cowboys of old, always saving a round for themselves.

A smirk found its way onto his face even as he felt a lump form in his throat, and Barnes turned the gun around, so that the muzzle was pressed firmly against the underside of his chin.

Taking one last shuddering breath, he fired.

Shit! Shit! Shit! Why the hell is this happening?

Jan had been crouching near the end of the line on the far left side when the rocket fired by one of the Flood combat forms slammed into the barrier she erected earlier. The explosion was enough to send her off her feet, but she had managed to stabilize herself and was on her feet again in an instant. The sight of so many downed Marines had been a shock and she had tried her best to pull them away from the pressing Flood, but she had seen the futility of it all. Barnes' proclamation to her from across the foyer was enough to break her from the spell she was put under by all the fighting, and she remembered that the key to today was surviving, not trying to take down as many as she could.

Being reanimated by the Flood after dying did not sound like a pleasant experience, and she was certain that by doing so she'd let everyone down.

The sight of Lieutenant Barnes would not leave her however, no matter how hard she tried to forget the look in his eyes as he told her he'd be right behind her. She'd known it to be a lie the moment the words left his mouth, but she left all the same. The crack of a handgun firing had started shortly after she retreated from the area, and it had been a long time since she last heard it.

Dashing through the twisting hallways, Jan finally emerged into the emergency entrance bay of the hospital. She slammed to a stop as the scene before her unfolded.

"Carlson get that thing off of Fred!" the Marine second lieutenant shouted as he ripped the guiding pin from his fragmentation grenade and sent it flying through the air. The detonation sounded and several combat forms were ripped apart by the ensuing shrapnel.

Jan spotted the soldier that the Lieutenant was speaking about. Amidst several other unmoving Marine bodies a lone soldier was wrestling with an infectious form in his hands as the creature struggled to stab its pincer into the soldier's neck.

Wasting no time Jan raced towards the fallen soldier and using the butt stock of the MA5B she slammed the infectious form hard enough for the creature to explode. Flipping the gun back around in her arms, Jan fired a short five-round burst into an approaching combat form. As it collapsed to the ground Jan offered her free hand to Fred and helped him up off the floor.

"Thanks," Fred said breathlessly.

The second lieutenant Jan had recognized from before turned to glance at her, and he must have remembered her as well.

"Why aren't you with Lieutenant Barnes?" he shouted over the gunfire.

"We were overrun!" Jan called back. "The Flood are moving through the hospital right now!"

The Marine second lieutenant cursed and looked at the bodies of the

Marines surrounding him.

"All right everyone grab your gear, we're falling back to the roof!"

Only seven of the twenty six Marines were capable of moving, and at once they quickly rose, firing off a final salvo at the Flood before turning to charge down the corridor that Jan had entered from. Jan watched silently as the Flood swarmed over the dead and unconscious Marine bodies. An M6C handgun lay at her feet and she quickly scooped it up and shoved it into her waistband. She looked away from the Marine corpses painfully and started off after the others who were using the staircase to climb up the eight flights of stairs that would take them to the rooftop.

The mutilated screams of the Flood echoed throughout the hospital, and Jan increased her speed, sprinting through the open door leading to the staircase. The stairs blurred as she ran, her mind a litany of sounds and memories of the battle against the Flood. Again and again Lieutenant Barnes' face stared back at her, his eyes lifeless as he ordered her to leave.

Oh God, we're going to die here.

She could hear the Marines several flights above her, their breath coming in gasps as they hightailed it towards the rooftop. Finally they reached the eighth floor and the door was thrown open, slamming loudly into the metal brace before closing once more. As Jan cleared the sixth floor something began to nag at the back of her mind.

G14...the Spartans!

The last steps leading to the seventh floor were bounded in a single leap, and Jan slammed open the door that would grant her access to the highest floor of the hospital without reaching the rooftop.

Her assault rifle was held at the ready as she emerged from the stairwell, her eyes roaming up and down the hallway. She moved forward at a slow pace, careful to keep her ears attuned to the surroundings, so that if anything disrupted the silence she would detect it instantly. As she turned down into the intensive care ward, Jan spotted a metal grate lying on the floor. Her gaze moved upwards, and she felt a chill as it came to a stop on the ventilation shaft that was now exposed.

As Jan neared she craned her neck, attempting to see up the darkened vent, but it was to no avail. Reaching down Jan picked up the metal grate and fastened it hastily to the vent cover, ensuring that if anything else was inside the shaft she'd at least here it when it came out. Recalling her last visit to the ward when she had come with the Master Chief, Jan turned down the right corridor that would lead her to the room that housed that injured Spartans.

Shell casings were littered around the floor, and Jan recognized the amber blood stains that covered the floor, walls, and ceiling. The Marine detail that had been stationed here to defend the Spartans must have put up a fight before being overwhelmed by the Flood. Jan couldn't take more than two steps without stepping upon the casings.

The door that had led into the Spartan's medical room had been ripped free. A considerable feat when taking into context the heavy security needed to get inside. Near the end of the hallway leading up to the door the blood stains of the Flood became mixed with what Jan could only surmise to be human blood.

Steeling herself, Jan inched closer to the open doorway, her body taut as her hands began trembling, causing the assault rifle to shake. She was only a few steps away.

What if the Flood got to them? The Marines must have been attacked awhile ago, otherwise I would have heard the gunfire.

Four steps.

Johnson said they have to link up with a subjects nervous system to take over. Maybe they were too injuredâ€|

Three steps.

Will the Master Chief be angry? I didn't want this to happen! I thought we could hold them off, that we could win.

Two steps.

I should run. I can't fight them like the others. They'll kill me.

One step.

I can't run away. I owe this to him, I have to make sure they're alright. I could never look him in the face again if I didn't.

Nothingâ€|there was nothing inside the room as Jan entered. The medical beds were empty.

A heavy sigh escaped her as she slumped against the door frame, and she shook her head, smiling.

All that worrying for nothing. The Spartans must have been transferred when they did the evacuation. I guess I can head back up to theâ€|roof?

Jan's thoughts were interrupted when she felt something fall upon her head. Reaching up and touching the area where she was hit, her hand came away with a thick, amber colored liquid. Slowly she tilted her head upwards, and felt the relief that had flooded her body drift away, and be replaced with raw fear.

Ohâ€|â€|shit.

"Looks like they're retreating Sarge!" Private Langdon shouted as he pointed across the twisted wreckage that was the corner end of the Covenant dropship. When the two Marine companies had finally linked up, nearly two miles from the point when they were separated,

Covenant dropships that had somehow survived the main cruisers crash landing, began doing strafing runs on the Marines. As they flew over they also dumped several loads of Flood infectious forms, which made the dropships a combined threat.

With the help of several Longsword squadrons however, the majority of the dropships had been shot down, or driven off to where they could do little damage. Under Johnson's insistence they headed for the Covenant cruiser, as he felt it unlikely the dropships would fire on the ship.

Despite some concerns from the officers, Johnson's idea paid off, and the dropships ended up simply crashing to the ground, as if they had suddenly lost control.

_Now that we've got the easy part out of the way, its time to really mix it up with the Flood, _Johnson smirked to himself, manually loading shells into the shotgun he had cradled in his arms.

At the moment the officers were discussing exactly what the plan of action should be. The specific orders given to them from Captain Keyes was to eliminate the Flood in the area, but also to check for whatever it is the Flood were looking for. Johnson was sure Keyes thought that perhaps it was the Ark, the Forerunner facility that 343 Guilty Spark had told them existed on Earth.

Working the action of the shotgun Johnson slung it around his shoulder, and looked down at the large attachÃ© case he had been lugging around for over an hour since they left the Pelicans.

This sonofabitch won't be of much use out in the open, but it'd sure as hell wreck some havoc in close quarters. Now if only I can convince the officers to let me check out this ship myself.

After moving close enough to the small circle of Marine officers it took them a few minutes to acknowledge his presence, and when they did it was Captain Morallis that finally noticed him.

"Is there a problem Sergeant?" Morallis' tone was neutral, but Johnson could tell he was annoyed. He didn't blame the Captain either. Most officers didn't much like having an enlisted soldier around, and one that had better intelligence on the situation than him.

"Sir I was just thinking, and I feel I would be of better service to this effort if I was given permission to check out this cruiser while the rest of the company continues on towards the epicenter," Johnson said. He could read Morallis' face as he contemplated Johnson's request. Obviously having the Sergeant out of the way would make it easier for him to lead his troops, and he couldn't really refuse him either. One quick talk with Captain Keyes and she'd be calling Morallis to tell him to let Johnson do what he felt was best.

"You have a point there Sergeant, but I don't want you going on your own. Take second and fourth squad from the thirteenth," Captain Morallis ordered. "If you run into any trouble that you can't handle give us a call and we'll come back to assist."

"Understood sir," Johnson said, saluting. Morallis returned the salute and then turned around to address the two companies, who were

scattered about the area watching for any signs of the Flood. Johnson heard the com channel for the battle net open up as Morallis began speaking to the troops.

"We're moving out. The Flood seem to be gathering near the epicenter of the blast that wiped this city out, so that's where we're headed. Sergeant Johnson has volunteered to clear out the Covenant ship of any Flood that are lingering behind. I want second and fourth squads from the thirteenth to assist him. Everyone else, let's move it on out."

Private Langdon, who had done most of the fighting over the past hour with Johnson, approached the Sergeant with a grim look on his face.

"It would seem I'm not going to be able to get away from you just yet Sarge," Langdon said sadly. "And here I had hopes of bravely battling the Flood over the ruins of this city, avenging the poor souls that died here."

"Cut the crap Langdon," Johnson said as he waved the remainder of Second and Fourth squad towards him. "I've got a feeling you'll be getting more than enough action inside this ship."

"Hmm, I should hope," Langdon replied, his eyes slowly drifting down to the attaché case once more. "Unless of course if you plan of having all the fun yourself."

Ignoring the comment Johnson explained the role the two squads would play to the others, and after hardening out the importance that they stay behind him at all times, he turned around to gaze up at the downed Covenant Capital ship. Before them lay a large crack within the foundation of the outer layers of the ships hull, which would grant them access to the insides.

Smirking to himself Johnson knelt down and opened up the large case he had been lugging around for so long. Apparently it was a source of curiosity amongst the troops as well, for the moment he opened it the two squads crowded around him to get a look.

The M7057 Defoliant Projector was a near relic in the UNSC. The flamethrower had first been developed nearly half a century ago when it had become necessary to burn the toxin-producing forests on the planet Eradanius. The weapon had also been designed in mind for the military as well, but no situation had as of yet given cause for its use.

"Shit Sarge, that thing is ancient. I thought you had some nice new machine gun or something," Langdon protested. Sergeant Johnson looked up at him with a sneer.

"Boy you should understand sometimes the best weapons are those from our past. This little number may be old, but I bet the old girl still knows how to make her enemies scream," Johnson said, his voice so cold it sent shivers down the backs of the other soldiers. With a jerk he pulled the Defoliant Projector free from the case and hoisted it into his arms. One hand held the rear grip, while the other held another located near the top.

The Defoliant Projector used volatile, semi-liquid adhesive that was

ignited with a spark once the trigger was compressed. At this point a steady stream of flames would burst from the front nozzle of the weapon. The range of the flamethrower was not far, but inside the twisting narrow hulls of a Covenant ship, it would be deadly.

"If you soldiers are done gawking, how about we move into the ship?" Johnson asked as he shuffled towards the entrance they'd be using.

Immediately on entering the ship, Johnson knew he'd made the right decision. The large spores that had become synonymous with the Flood were littered about the area. Emergency lighting had been turned on, more than likely because of the crash landing the ship had suffered. With the low lighting, it would make seeing the Flood difficult, but as Johnson shifted the weapon in his hands slightly, he knew he'd be giving them more than enough light to see with.

The pained breathing was all Jan could hear as she ran, and it took her a few moments to realize it was her own. The Flood had been waiting for her, they laid a trap, anticipating her arrival. Three combat forms had been hanging from the ceiling, and even though their bodies were now twisted into the mutations that were present in all Flood possessed bodies, Jan knew who they were.

The Spartans had stood over two meters tall, much bigger than any other human combat form. The massive muscular builds they were known for gave them away the moment Jan saw them. Her shock had given the Flood-possessed Spartans a chance to drop down and attack. One of them had charged at her, and using the tentacle's that had sprung forth out of it's arm, swung at her.

Jan was aware enough to bring her arms up to block the attack, but even so, the strength inside the swing was enough to send her flying backwards, crashing heavily upon the floor. Her forearms felt as if they were on fire, and she was certain they had been broken trying to block the Flood's attack.

Fear had given her the strength to turn and run, but she knew how fast the Spartans were, and they would catch her, but as she ran the only thought she could dwell on was the Master Chief. He would hate her for what she let happen to the only thing he considered to be family.

Compared to seeing his hatred for her, death was nothing.

Her legs had carried her down the twisting hallways, into an area she had no recollection of. Regardless she continued forward, casting her gaze behind her momentarily to see how close the Flood had gained.

The three combat forms were close, so close that Jan could make out the bandages that had once covered their bodies. Adrenalin flooded within her and she ran faster, her eyes darting back and forth for any sign of an exit that would let her escape. A heavy sliding door for a medical lab caught her eye and she raced towards it.

Whoever had last used it must have been in a hurry when the

evacuation was sounded, because the door had been not been locked. As Jan raced towards it, the motion sensors picked up her movements and the doors slid open. The second Jan was inside she spun around and accessed the small computer panel that operated the door.

The automatic lockdown was activated at the last second, and the doors slammed shut just as the possessed Spartans slammed into it. Their hulking forms were thrown against it in rage and Jan slinked to the back of the room, tears running freely down her face as she cowered in the corner. Her body trembled as each slam against the door made her jump.

They're going to kill me. That door can't hold them forever. I'm going to die in here.

Pulling her knees up to her chest, Jan wrapped her arms around her legs and tried to shut everything out.

The feeling of something shifting inside her pocket snapped her back to reality. Slipping a shaking hand down into her pants she pulled a small device she didn't recognize out. As she stared at it she remembered Sergeant Johnson's last words to her.

The chatter! I can call him!

Activating the chatter Jan hurriedly called the preset number, cautionary relief filling her once more. The sounds of the device trying to link up with Johnson's personal communications channel went off in her ear and she listened intently for his voice.

The sound of static and nothing else flooded her senses, and Jan stared down at the device in shock.

"Itâ€¦it doesn't work?" Jan said in disbelief. Trembling she activated the auto-dialer again, but once again she received nothing but static in return. Once more she felt her strength leave her, and the disposable chatter fell to the floor.

Fire burned all across the deck. Flames licked and lashed out at the passing Marines as if Hell had reached up and torn the ship in two. The hulls inside the Covenant ship had been damaged on the crash landing, but Sergeant Johnson was wrecking far more damage than any crash could ever do.

The two squads of Marines were huddled behind him, firing sporadic bursts of fire at any of the parasitic flood forms that Johnson's flames hadn't touched. Any glory of fighting off the Flood were soon forgotten, as the other Marines simply cowered and tried not to get caught up in the slaughter Sergeant Johnson was conducting.

The M7057 Defoliant Projector worked as well as Johnson had promised. The small infectious forms were burned to ash before they could come within fifteen feet of the group, and the large combat forms which Johnson informed them were Flood-infected Brutes, turned into flaming bon fires under Johnson's careful direction.

Using the Defoliant Projector was difficult. The adhesive liquid that

he used was capable of burning for up to three minutes after being ejected from the flamethrower. If Johnson didn't use a steady hand, the stream of flames could potentially be fatal to himself.

Not sure if this regenerative shit applies to burns as well, but I sure as hell don't want to find out.

As the last screams of the Brute combat form died out Johnson eased up on the trigger of the flamethrower and for the first time in an hour the flames died out.

Turning around Johnson looked at the two squads of assembled Marines and smirked.

"Didn't I tell you this old girl still had some life in her?"

The Marines smiled uneasily back at him, only Private Langdon scoffed at the Sergeant. Johnson turned back around and continued down through the damaged docking bay. He had removed the large, obtrusive helmet that Captain Keyes had forced him to wear, as shortly after entering the ship the Captain had called and she informed him that because of a Slip Space jump being performed by a renegade ship too low in the Earth's atmosphere communications would be cut off and disrupted, probably across the entire planet.

Exiting the docking bay, Johnson felt another tendril of pain lance up his right arm. The concurrent discomfort that had been flashing throughout the limb ever since the Flood showed up had begun to make him uneasy, but he had written it off as simply left over problems from having his arm reattached in such an obtuse manner.

The corridor leading out of the docking bay bled off into a chamber, one Johnson recognized instantly. It was a near mirror image copy of the chamber he had been in on _Honor Without Mercy_. When he had fought the Flood leader and nearly died doing so.

Well, at least I don't have to worry about that overgrown fly trap anymore.

"S-Sarge?" Langdon's shaken voice cut through Johnson's thoughts and caught his attention. Shifting Johnson looked over his shoulder to where Langdon and the other Marines stood in shock. Langdon lifted one hand and pointed shakily down into the shadows of the chamber.

"What is that thing?" he asked.

Feeling his heart begin to race, Johnson turned back, his eyes fixating down into the chamber.

No fucking way!

The long tentacles gave the creature away instantly, even before it's voice carried down into the chamber, sending chills down the spines of everyone present.

"You have walked into your grave humans. Death is all you will find here, and I shall give it to you."

"Bullshit!" Johnson shouted, his hands clenching tightly on the

flamethrower in his hands. "I fucking killed you!"

"Do you presume to know me human? I am not benevolent, had we met your life would have ended, and you would be consumed by us," the creature said, tentacles lashing out down the chamber.

Shit not this again!

"Get the fuck out of here!" Johnson yelled at the other Marines as he dove to the side, evading the tentacles but slamming his shoulder into the ground painfully. Several of the Marines needed no inclination, and turned and ran from the chamber. Several of them remained however, including Private Langdon.

"I said get out of here!" Johnson ordered as he pulled himself to his feet.

"Screw you Sarge," Langdon replied, his normally calm voice shaking slightly. "I've had enough of your glory hogging. This big sonofabitch looks like he'll put up a bit of a fight before he goes down, and I've been itching for some fun."

Damnit, these jackass's are going to get themselves killed!

Throwing caution to the wind, Johnson charged straight down the length of the chamber, heading straight for Gravemind.

"You possess our blood, human. What are you?" Gravemind asked Johnson, even as it lashed out once more at him.

Jerking to the side Johnson evaded the tentacles once more. He heard the protests from the Marines behind him but he continued on.

"I'm the sonofabitch that killed you the last time we met in a place like this!" Johnson shouted. As he neared and got a full profile view of Gravemind he realized something.

What the hell? This thing isn't even a third of the size that it was before.

"You're a lot smaller than the last time. What's the matter? Just cause you lost you had to put yourself on a diet!" Johnson yelled. He was within range now, and stopped his suicide charge, setting the Defoliant Projector in his hands and compressed the trigger.

Even as flames lashed out at Gravemind, the creature spoke.

"You are one of us human, and we are one as a whole. Your blood is mixed with ours. Now you will truly be one with the whole."

Ignoring Gravemind's words Johnson continued to spray the giant Flood leader with the Defoliant Projector. The pain inside his right arm blossomed, and Johnson lost his grip on the flamethrower, letting it clatter to the ground.

With a strangled scream Johnson felt his arm explode, and he stared at the mangled limb in disbelief as tentacles spewed forth, amber blood streaming from the torn flesh onto the ground. Shouting his disbelief Johnson fell to the ground, his good arm pounding into the

deck floor repeatedly.

Fuck! Goddamnit! How the hell is this possible?

"The pain is to cleanse you, human. Embrace it and you shall be reborn."

No way! No fucking way am I becoming one of these freaks!

Biting down hard on his lip, Johnson stopped his screams of pain and reached down to his leg with his left arm, ripping the combat knife free from its place. With a grunt he shoved it into his right shoulder up to the hilt. Blinding pain lanced through his body once more, and Johnson forced himself to stay conscious.

The flames he had spewed forth from the flamethrower when he dropped it lashed out at him, but he ignored them as he began sawing through his flesh.

"Jesus Christ, Sarge!" Langdon's voice sounded behind Johnson, and through the fog in his mind he detected the sounds of assault rifle gunfire. As he worked the knife, cutting through the untainted flesh of his right arm, he could hear Gravemind shout its fury and begin to attack the other Marines.

The pain was unbearable, but Johnson continued to pull the knife downwards. As it connected with bone he nearly screamed once more. Steeling himself he raked the knife harder and faster through his skin.

"Sarge what the fuck are you doing?" Langdon shouted, a moment before a tentacle smashing into his side. The sickening crunch of bone rang out and Langdon slammed into the ground, his assault rifle still in his grasp. The other Marines continued firing, but were soon overwhelmed by Gravemind's attack, and were beaten to the ground, hard enough to shatter the deck floor.

With a final cry Johnson finally sliced through the last bit of flesh and watched as the twisted and mangled limb fell to the ground, tentacles twitching.

"An amusing gesture human, but irregardless nonetheless. You will be consumed by our fury. You will never carry out the Forerunners duty for you. The Ark will not be activated."

The urge to vomit was strong, but Johnson fought it down and crawled through the flames towards the flamethrower. With only one arm it was difficult, and he had to steel himself not to scream out from the pain. He had just gotten close to the flamethrower when a lone tentacle wrapped around his waist and hoisted him up into the air. Johnson's grip on the flamethrower loosened and it fell to the ground, bouncing along until it finally slid to a stop a few feet from the base of Gravemind.

"The Forerunners tried to contain us, but failed. They tried to destroy us, and failed. They tried to destroy our sustenance, but they failed once again. Now they are gone, and all that remains are their pitiful subjects. Be consumed by our acrimony."

"We ain't gonna let you take over," Johnson said, his voice weak as

he felt his blood drain from the wound at his shoulder.

"This is our purpose, and nothing you can do will change the course all will follow," Gravemind said.

An explosion down below where Johnson was suspended in the air sounded, and Gravemind screamed in rage as flames suddenly erupted all over it's body.

Johnson twisted around in Gravemind's grip and saw that the spare canister tank for the flamethrower had exploded. Twisting around more he saw Private Langdon lying on the ground holding his assault rifle. Langdon glanced up briefly with his last bit of strength to stare at Johnson before collapsing lifelessly to the deck.

As Gravemind screamed the tentacle holding Johnson pulled back, and flung him away, down towards the other end of the chamber. He slammed into the deck hard, and skidded along the floor for several feet before coming to a halt.

"This changes nothing human!" Gravemind's voice shouted, so loud that Johnson felt pressure in his ears. "Your extinction will be carried out, and so will the destruction of the others. The Flood will hold dominion over the galaxy once more!"

Johnson climbed painfully to his feet, and watched the funeral pyre that was building over Gravemind, before turning and limping out of the chamber. He had gone no more than twenty meters when he heard an incoming call on his com channel.

Probably Captain Keyes, wondering what the hell is going on.

The voice on the transmission however, most certainly wasn't Miranda Keyes.

'Sergeant Johnson?' Jan's voice asked. He could hear whimpering in the background, and it was a moment before he realized that it was Jan doing it.

"Jan? What's wrong?" Johnson asked, his fatigue and pain forgotten momentarily.

'They're going to kill me, please, you have to help me!' Jan pleaded.

"Who's going to kill you? Jan tell me what's happening!" Johnson ordered.

'The Floodâ€|they came. Oh God I'm so sorry. They moved through the hospital so fast I didn't remember about the Spartans until it was too late. I hid but they found me.'

The Spartans? Johnson thought, confused, until he remembered that Fred, Will, and Linda were being held in the HighCom Facility hospital. _Shit, the Flood got to them?_

'Please you have to help me. They're almost through the door.'

"Jan do you have a weapon?" Johnson asked earnestly.

'Yeahâ€|' Jan responded.

"Then shoot them for Christ's sake! Aim for the chest and fire. If you can kill them and hold off wherever you are I'll be there soon," Johnson said.

'I can't!' Jan shouted. 'I can't shoot them!'

"Why not? Jesus, Jan you have to kill them or they'll kill you!"

'He'll hate me,' Jan said, her voice sounding like that of a child.

Johnson wasn't sure who she meant at first, but then it became clear in an instant.

"Jan, the Master Chief is a soldier. He'll understandâ€|"

'No he won't!' Jan protested. 'They're all he has left and I can't take them away from him!'

"Jan the Flood have already taken them from him," Johnson countered. "If the Master Chief was there he'd kill them himself. They're not Spartans anymore, they aren't who they used to be. You have to kill them, the Master Chief will understand, trust me."

'Iâ€|I can't,' Jan said, and in the background the sound of a large explosion could be heard. 'Oh noâ€|'

"Jan?" Johnson shouted.

'They broke through the door!'

"Goddamnit Jan,
shoot!"

'Goddamnit Jan, shoot!'

Jan dropped the chatter and starred in horror as the three combat forms entered the medical lab. Her hands reached into her waistband and pulled the M6C handgun free and she shakily pointed it at the lead Flood form.

I can't do it. I can't kill them.

They spotted her cowering in the corner, and began to move straight for her position.

I have to do itâ€|

Crack! Crack!

The lead combat form slammed into the ground, the rounds fired from the handgun had passed straight through the creatures chest, ripping the infectious form inside the chest cavity apart.

Shifting the gun to the right, Jan fired two more rounds into the

other Flood-infected Spartan, and like the first, it fell to the ground. The remaining combat form charged at her, and was within striking distance when Jan fired again. The lone round pierced the chest of the last Spartan and it crumpled down directly in front of Jan.

The handgun in her hands was dropped, and Jan stared at the fallen Spartans in shock. Slowly she dropped her head down onto her knees and began crying.

She had wanted to be a soldier, but never at the cost of the only thing in her life worth living for.

Janissary James sat, crouched in a medical lab inside a hospital located just outside of Sydney, Australia and cried, her spirit broken.

The planet hadn't changed at all since the last time he had seen it. The desert sand that covered nearly the entire planet was still around, and if pillars of fire and the corpses of other Prophets were strewn about, the landscape would be identical to the last time he had set eyes upon it.

The Prophet of Truth stood before the open bay door of the Forerunner ship and stared out at the sand covered landscape and felt fear travel up his body. He had left behind the hover chair he had come to use in his old age.

It had only been a few hours since the Forerunner ship had finally exited Slip Space, and allowed Truth to gaze upon the planet he had once called home. As the ship still remained in lockdown mode, he had watched helplessly as the ship headed straight for the planet and then proceeded to land.

The Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar had been sent out first, to scout the area to ensure that nothing was there. It was only after he had received word from all of the scouts that there was no other creatures in the area that Truth finally exited the Forerunner ship.

There is an evil here, one that will slaughter us all should we awaken it.

His withered body protested the action of moving about, but the Prophet of Truth was not so foolish as to use his hover chair out on the planet's surface. He had ordered that any and all technological devices be turned off, and never used. The same went for their weapons. Truth knew that even the slightest hint of artificial power could have them be detected.

"Your eminence," the Jiralhanae Captain said, gaining Truth's attention. "What are your orders?"

"We shall move ahead for now," Truth ordered, trying to keep the waiver out of his voice. "I want to be as far away from the Forerunner ship as possible."

"As you command," the Captain said, bowing low. He turned to inform the other Covenant members of the order when he stopped. Something

stood upon the far sand dune on the horizon. He turned to point it out to the Prophet of Truth, but Truth had already seen it, and his body had frozen.

It cannot be, how did they find us so fast?

Shrouded in robes that were thick and flowing, a lone creature stood on the far horizon, staring at the assembled Covenant members with curiosity.

The Jiralhanae Captain looked back at the creature in confusion, and then turned to the Prophet of Truth.

"Your eminence, what is that creature?" he asked.

"That," Truth said, his voice dry and cracked. He cleared his throat, his eyes never leaving the figure that stood, watching them.

"That is a
Forerunner."

Author's Notes: Well, this chapter took forever to write, but at least it got written. Nice and big right? Everyone likes those kinds of chapters.

Soâ€¦any thoughts on the ending?

20. The End of a War Chapter 19

Author's Notes: After the somewhat lengthy break I took in-between Chapters 17 and 18, I decided to get down to work on this chapter as soon as possible. Obviously checking the dates in between the last two chapters will show you how well that plan worked outâ€¦

Originally I wanted to get this story finished by the end of the summer, but it looks like that plans not exactly going to work. I'm waddling along though, going as fast as I can. I've got a bunch more garbage on my plate and it absorbs a lot of time. Vacations and what-not, along with work.

I really enjoyed everyone's reactions last chapter after my cruel heartless killing off of Will, Linda, and Fred. I was pretty worried I'd get castrated over it, with people yelling from the rooftops that I didn't portray the scenario properly. Basically what I really wanted to get across was, this whole war against the Flood has very little to do with honor and heroics. Its about survival. I knew early on I couldn't give the Spartans a final grand finale. A battle of epic proportions where they go down fighting like warriors. Having them injured and immobile while the Flood ravaged their bodiesâ€¦that was just about perfect. Probably not in anyone else's eyes thoughâ€¦

**Plenty more action on Earth this chapter, but we're also getting a tiny look into what's been going on with the Master Chief. Not a big look, because they will be the focus of the next few chapters. I just really want to give everyone a refresher as to their situation. We

won't be seeing Earth for awhile after this chapter, so keep any complaints about the lack of Chiefness to a minimum pleaseâ€|**

**

>For those that forgot about what happened the last time we saw the Chief, the Arbiter just finished off the last of the Brute fleet awaiting 'Eranumee's ship, the Attrition. 'Eranumee (the Elite that had escaped from Danrun, the Covenant home world, in the midst of the epic battle going on there to try and rally the Sangheili on the Sangheili home world, Silone) emerged from Slip Space, with nothing but a lot of wreckage and Honor Without Mercy waiting for him. **

**Also, wow, this story has surpassed the 100,000 word mark.

**

The End of a War

Chapter 19

Abandoning Homeâ€|

The skies let loose their fury over the continent of Africa. Thunderous clouds drenched the Earth with rain, while lightning leapt through the air, crackling with power. Down below as the landscape sped by, the figures of crumpled bodies were visible. Cities smoldered, burning from battles waged, and the screams of the dying were lost in a torrent of flames and rain.

Sergeant Johnson watched listlessly out the back of the Pelican, his eyes lifeless as he sat immobile. The winds prevented the rain from entering the Pelican bay, but Johnson's face showed signs of moisture nonetheless.

The pain that washed through his body as a medic attempted to clean and dress the wound at his right shoulder failed to register with his mind. He was miles away, reliving the events that had occurred no more than an hour ago.

I shoulda fought Captain Morallis harder against bringing those two squads. They didn't need to die, especially not because of me. What the hell good am I, if I can't even protect a few Marines?

Johnson had stumbled through the wreckage of the Covenant cruiser until he finally reached the entrance he had used previously. From there he radioed for a Pelican to pick him up, and had waited, fighting the urge to faint from the blood loss until the ship appeared. Once aboard he didn't succumb to the overwhelming urge to do so, and at the administrations of the medic inside, as well as the Flood regenerative abilities he had managed to stay conscious.

The Spartans are dead and Jan too probably. I've failed everyone.

Dimly Johnson became aware that the medic was speaking to him.

"-not sure how you healed so fast, but it looks like the bleeding has stopped. There was no serious hemorrhaging it appears, and even the clavicle bone has managed to reconstruct itself, albeit with a far more limited size," the medic said as he sat back beside Johnson,

inhaling deeply on the cigarette cradled between his fingers. "I don't know what you've been eating these days Sergeant, but I'd appreciate it if you let me in on your secret."

Grunting even as he recalled the memory of cutting off his own limb, Johnson turned back to stare at the passing scenery.

The two Marine companies are going to need my help once they get to the center of New Mombasa, but I need to know for sure what happened to Jan. I owe it to the Chief, but I also owe it to her. She was willing to put her ass on the line, and if she managed to survive I'll tear that fucking hospital down to find her, one arm and all.

"So how exactly did you lose that arm Sergeant?" the medic asked, extending the pack of Golden Clip smokes out towards Johnson.

"It's a long story," Johnson replied, his arm gesturing towards the combat knife sheathed along his lower calf. After a moment of indecision he took an offered cigarette from the pack. The medic reached into his flak jacket and removed an ancient zippo lighter, and huddled close to Johnson as he lit the cigarette.

"No shit? You cut it off yourself?" the medic questioned, surprised at Johnson's admission.

Moving the cigarette to his mouth, Johnson used his arm to remove the knife from the sheath strapped to his leg and flipped it around, offering the knife handle-first to the medic.

The medic let out a low whistle as he lightly ran his finger along the serrated edge of the knife. He looked curiously at the amber blood stains that were mixed with the red tint of human blood.

"This sonofabitch looks like it could cut through steel," the medic admitted, scratching off some of the blood stains with his finger. "What's with all this greenish shit? Were you cutting up some Flood with it first?"

Johnson fought against the shudder that rippled through his body at the memory that filled his senses. The foreign feeling of having the blood of the Flood pulse through his arm, and begin to race up his body. He had torn the mutated limb free at the last moment, before the blood could spread throughout the rest of his insides—before he became one of those freaks permanently.

"Something like that," Johnson replied softly, killing the cigarette in one deep pull and tossing it out the back of the Pelican.

Absently he noted that the land had tapered off, and they were now flying over a large body of water. That meant they were over the Indian Ocean, and Australia was only a stones throw away.

She couldn't take it anymore. The blood had continued to flow, spilling around her, soaking the material of her pants, and the arms of the flak jacket she wore. The sickening green liquid released a

putrid odor, and along with the rotting flesh of the Spartan's corpses, the urge to vomit was strong.

Crawling away from the crumpled forms of the fallen Flood forms, Jan absently noted that the gunfire on the rooftop had yet to cease. The remaining Marines must have been drawing the majority of the Flood's attention, as she had yet to encounter anymore of the creatures in the last hour, after she had killed the infected Spartans. Her mind was screaming that she needed to go assist the Marines, but when her gaze fell on the pistol she had discarded on the floor, her body weakened.

Jan knew that every face she saw would belong to the twisted horrified faces of the Spartans, and every shot entering their bodies would make her relive those events over and over again. A strangled sob wracked her body and Jan finally stopped crawling as she came to rest beside a large metal cabinet.

With a grunt of effort she wrenched the door free and after clearing out several boxes of medical supplies she crawled inside. The cabinet was large enough to accommodate her even if she wished to stand, but Jan couldn't get her limbs to cooperate. The pain that had been burning within her arms after blocking the strike from one of the infected Spartans had faded, and was replaced with a numbness that filled her entire body. All she wanted to do was hide and forget about everything that happened.

_I'm a failure. I wasn't able to help anyone. Lieutenant Barnes, the Marines, the other Spartansâ€¦all of them. They all died because of me. _

I wanted to help fight this war, to make a difference.

Jan chuckled bitterly.

I got my wish. I've doomed humanity. I killed the last hope we had of winning the war against the Covenant, against the Flood. The Master Chief is millions of light years away. He can't save Earth, and neither can I. Everyone will die, humanity will cease to existâ€¦and it's all my fault. All because I didn't want to be protected anymore.

Johnson was right, I should have stayed in the HighCom Facility, where I belong. I'm not a soldier. I've let everyone down. Dad, the Master Chief, humanity, my friendsâ€¦

As Jan's thoughts continued down the dark path of depression, she slowly began to collapse to the side of the cabinet, her body lifeless as the last of her willpower faded.

If the other Spartans hadn't been wounded from before, I wouldn't have been able to kill them with just a stupid pistol. They were weak, crippled from the fight above Earth, and I killed them.

I should have known this would happenâ€¦All I can do is be protected. That'sâ€¦that's all I'm good for.

Sydney was in ruins.

The city burned as the Pelican soared overhead, and Johnson watched it pass morosely from the open bay doors. The weather in Australia was in contrast to the storms that ravaged Africa, as the afternoon sun bared down onto the land, feeding the flames with it's heat.

Over his radio Johnson could hear scattered reports from the few remaining Marines in the city. The Flood were still fighting, and the Marines were in danger of being overrun, completely losing the last line of defense from within the city. His lone hand clenched tightly, and he had to fight the urge to lash out. Mindless rage wouldn't do any good here; he needed to be calm and collected, to prepare himself for what he would find at the hospital. Johnson had called the chatter he had left Jan, but it had never been answered, a good indication to what he expected.

Switching over to the local frequency, Johnson spoke into the Pelican's network.

"When we reach the hospital, I want you to haul ass out of there, but make sure you stay within shouting distance," Johnson informed the pilot. "I don't want to find myself high and dry when it comes time to leave."

"Roger that Sergeant," the Pilot responded, and as Sydney disappeared beneath them, he picked up speed and roared down towards the residential district that sat between the capital city of Australia, and the small hospital that was their destination.

The medic sitting beside Johnson looked at him curiously.

"You sure it's a good idea to do this alone Sergeant?" he asked, and earned a cross look from the Marine. "I mean, you've only got one good arm, and the only weapons we have are a couple SMG's along with that knife you're carrying. Not exactly the best setup to have when running into a Flood-infested building, right? Why not call up a couple squads of Marines that can help you clear the place out?"

"I'll be fine on my own. I've faced these bastards more times than most people see their own mother, I know how to fight them," Johnson said, his bravado sounding weak to his own ears.

The medic prepared a rebuttal, but was cut off as the pilot's voice came over the Pelican's communications network.

"Hospitals dead ahead, looks like there's some fighting on the rooftop."

Frowning slightly Johnson got to his feet and stepped carefully into the cockpit, peering out the front of the ship. The pilot had decreased the Pelican's speed as they approached the hospital, and they were about a hundred yards from the building when Johnson gazed through. He saw what tipped the pilot off. Muzzle flashes and grenade detonations flashed across the rooftop.

"Get close enough so I can talk with whoever's still alive," Johnson ordered. The Pelican picked up speed and came to a stop, hovering

just high enough over the hospital to ensure the pilot could have enough maneuverability in case they came under fire.

Johnson quickly cycled through the different frequencies until he found the closed net the Marines were using.

"This is Sergeant Johnson, I request immediate status of your team and assessment on enemy strength," Johnson said over the net. The Marines had undoubtedly saw the Pelican come in and the reply was near instantaneous.

"Sergeant? This is Second Lieutenant Daniel Steele; we currently have seventeen men remaining who can still fight. There are over twenty wounded, and the rest are all dead. Am I to presume that you are the medi-vac we requested almost an hour ago?" came a voice over the radio.

"I am acting under orders of Naval Captain Miranda Keyes, sir. I was dispatched to recover a female civilian who had been fighting with your contingent. However if you can keep the Flood at bay for a few moments we can land and you can load up the wounded."

"Understood," Lieutenant Steele, replied over the com channel. Johnson returned to the back of the Pelican and stood beside the medic, who was leaning out the open bay to gaze down at the fighting carrying on below.

"It looks like a lot of people got killed," the medic said. Johnson turned and looked at him as the medic continued. "Those big Flood forms, they're formed when humans are taken over by the Flood right? There's so many of them."

Johnson looked down at the raging battle. The bodies littered around the rooftop, and on the surrounding pavement around the hospital, were numerous.

"Yeah, looks like it."

"Y'know, I was thinking, back when I saw the devastation in New Mombasa after the Covenant fled," the medic said. "I wondered what exactly we humans had done. Why do we deserve this? What sort of atrocities could mankind have carried out that we would earn this kind of punishment?"

The medic chuckled mirthlessly and shook his head in amazement.

"Even after so many days I couldn't find any answers. There are a lot of people out there that like to say we brought this on ourselves, saying we got too proud, thinking that we were the most advanced race in existence. We moved off into new galaxies and inhabited different planets, not ever thinking that a different form of life could be out there. Then out of nowhere, the Covenant find us, and just like that, we're no longer the highest link on the food chain anymore. There's this big bad enemy that's so much more advanced than us, that the best thing we can do is run, and even then its only a matter of time before they find us."

Johnson stared at the medic, unsure of where he was going with his speech.

"I don't think this is some kind of divine punishment for becoming too obsessed with our own achievements," the medic explained. "We were only following our own nature. Expanding and growing, advancing into new realms and realities. That's what we're designed to do. God hasn't abandoned us; he was never with us to begin with. If God created humankind, then he must have also created the Covenant too. Even the Flood must have been something God put into the universe. Why? If God had chosen mankind, then why would we be faced with so much adversity? What are we supposed to do against these kinds of enemies? They won't ever stop until we're gone, wiped off the face of existence forever."

Johnson wasn't a religious man; he had never resigned himself into believing there was a higher power governing his fate, pushing him towards his ultimate goal and destiny. He believed human beings were ruled by what they had inside, what they aspired to be.

And while I may not know anything about why the Covenant were put into the Universe, I do know one thing.

"The Flood," Johnson started, memories of a vicious battle playing across his mind, reminiscent of the one he had fought only a few hours ago. "The Flood weren't created by God. They were made by a different kind of power, one so advanced; the only thing left for them to do was to give themselves eternal life."

Through that blazing act of ignorance they masterminded their own demise, cultivating an enemy so powerful that their dominance was turned against them. The Forerunner are the architects of their own extinction, and humanity's as well it would seem.

"I don't pretend to have any answers," Johnson said, resting his hand upon the medic's shoulder, "But I do know one thing. Right now there's only one thing for mankind to care about. Survival. This is the final stepping stone towards our extinction, if we lose this final battle we're finished. Everything humanities ever accomplished, there won't be anything left."

"All you have to do is decide what your role is going to be. Are you going to become just one more faceless victim? Or will you stand up and fight, making sure that even if mankind doesn't survive in physical form, it most certainly will in the hearts of our conquerors. We've got to give them a fight they'll remember for all eternity."

The medic stared back at Johnson in confusion for a long moment, before a smile graced his face and laughter erupted from his mouth.

"Sergeant, you are amazing," he laughed. Johnson felt a smile brim at the corners of his mouth when he felt the Pelican begin to descend. Removing his hand from the medic's shoulder he bent down and retrieved the pair of SMG's, shouldering them alongside his lone arm.

"Help get the wounded loaded up and then stay with the Pelican," Johnson ordered as the rooftop quickly rose up to meet them. He leapt out of the bay and landed on the granite rooftop, turning to look at the medic one last time.

"I'll be back as soon as possible."

Without another word Johnson took off, running across the strewn Flood-infected bodies towards the small Marine encampment near the center of the rooftop.

"Sergeant Johnson?" a bedraggled looking officer asked as Johnson neared. Johnson flipped him a casual salute and then looked at the gathered Marines. No sign of Jan.

"Sir, can you tell me where you last saw the civilian girl?" Johnson asked Lieutenant Steele. The Marine officer looked puzzled for a moment before remembering.

"She was in the staircase with us, when we were heading up to the roof after we got overrun. When we got settled down she was nowhere to be found so I presumed she didn't make it. I'm sorry that's all I know," Lieutenant Steele said, shrugging his shoulders.

"I suppose it can't be helped," Johnson sighed and made his way towards the rooftop entrance that would lead down into the rest of the hospital.

"What about some reinforcements? We're getting slaughtered here. My men are running low on ammunition and we're exhausted," Steele protested, and Johnson felt a sour look grace his face at the officer's words.

"The Flood have nearly taken Sydney, the residential area in between here will be in danger should that happen. All across the planet Flood controlled ships have touched down, and the Marines have been deployed. There are no reinforcements Lieutenant, everything that can be deployed, has," Johnson said simply, and then turned back around.

That an officer like that is in charge of protecting those other Marines. If only Lieutenant Barnes had kept himself alive. Showing weakness and desperation in front of the grunts is foolish. Any more officers like him and we may wind up being wiped out completely.

The staircase was empty, and Johnson began a quick decent. There was no time for subtlety, he needed to get in, find Jan; either her corpse or her living body, and get back to the rooftop.

Because of such an officer's ignorance, it looks like I'm going to have to search floor by floor. I better start with the closest one and work my way down.

Johnson slammed the door leading into the seventh floor open and charged through, one of the SMG's held within his left hand. The eerie silence that seemed to occupy any location the Flood inhabited filled the empty corridors of the intensive care ward. Johnson could almost feel the Flood moving around him, but they were nowhere to be seen.

At times like this with no real sense of direction, its best to follow the trails of battle.

The blood stains and shell casings were littered around the floor leading towards the room Johnson surmised to be where the injured Spartans were being held. The large amount of blood was puzzling, as there seemed to be no bodies nearby. The room was empty, aside from some more blood stains.

Flood secretion was something Johnson had seen many times, so he recognized the trail of disgusting filth that led away from the room and down a random hallway. There were three trails, which meant more than likely three infected Flood forms had went in that direction.

Following the trail, Johnson entered through a couple different wards before he came to the doors of a medical lab. They had been smashed through, as if something had been slammed against them repeatedly until the stress could not be taken any longer.

There must have been something the Flood wanted very badly inside.

Stepping carefully Johnson entered the lab, and stopped short. The three mangled bodies that were crumpled on the floor of the lab seemed almost to stare back at him. Swallowing hard Johnson moved closer, and saw that the bodies showed signs of having been wrapped in bandages.

Not exactly the most conclusive bit of evidence that they're the Spartans, but these things are bigger than any Flood form I've ever seen. The trail of blood and other secretions must have come from the Flood possessing such damaged bodies.

So if the Spartans are here, then where's Jan?

Johnson searched the floor and surrounding walls, but found no sign of human blood, which meant Jan had escaped the encounter with the Spartans unscathed. The handgun she had used to kill the Spartans lay beside the disposable chatter he had given her. Johnson stood puzzled near the end of the lab, trying to figure out exactly what must have occurred inside the room.

The sound of crunching glass behind him caught his attention though, and Johnson spun around, his SMG trained on the doorway ready to unload into the Flood form that must have just entered.

"I know I disobeyed an order Sergeant, but I don't think an execution is in order here," the medic from the Pelican said as he stepped into the medical lab.

"What the hell are you doing here? I told you to help with the wounded," Johnson said angrily.

"It looks like the Flood have backed off for now, and since there really isn't anything I can do for the guys that are injured that hasn't already been done, I got the other Marines to load them up while I took a look around the hospital for anymore wounded," the medic replied nonchalantly.

"Idiot," Johnson growled. "Its morons like you that get killed while so young. Don't take unnecessary risks you bastard."

The medic smirked at Johnson and laughed.

"This coming from the man who gave me a speech about moving forward without hesitation," he chuckled. "Well Sergeant I am taking your earlier advice instead of this latest batch, so with all due respect I shall say kindly that the Sergeant can go screw himself."

Johnson flinched and prepared another retort but stopped when he heard a muted shuffle from behind. Turning hesitantly he looked over to where the sound originated from, and saw a large metal cabinet.

The medic questioned Johnson but the Marine Sergeant waved him, silently motioning for him to remain silent. Creeping towards the cabinet, Johnson kept the SMG in front of him, making sure that he made no noise with each footstep.

Steeling himself, Johnson placed one hand on the handle that would open the cabinet, and after taking a deep breath he wrenched the door open, preparing to spray the inside with bullets. His finger didn't stray from the trigger guard however, after he saw what was inside.

Janissary James stared back at him in shock, her face red and puffy, obviously from having shed many tears in the last while. Her huddled form and frightened look made her appear as if she was no more than a child, and Johnson smiled down at her, before turning around back to the medic.

"Looks like we can get out of here a lot faster thanâ€¦!" Johnson cut himself off when he saw the infected Flood form standing behind the medic, who was staring back at Johnson, puzzled over the Sergeant's abrupt change in demeanor.

"Get down!" Johnson cried as he charged across the medical lab to grab the pistol that lay on the floor. Using the SMG was too risky, the uncontrolled line of fire would ensure that the medic would be hit, and Johnson wasn't willing to take the risk.

The medic turned in shock, just in time to see the infected Flood form swing its tentacle arm in a wide arc, slamming him off to the side, where he flew through the room before finally crashing into the wall heavily.

"Shit!" Johnson cursed as he picked up the handgun and turned, firing the remaining seven shots in the magazine into the chest of the creature. The rounds stalled the Flood form for a moment, but it resumed its charge towards the fallen medic. Swearing violently Sergeant Johnson tossed the handgun aside as he moved forward, towards the infected human. His hand slipped down and wrenched the knife free of the sheath strapped to his leg.

The infected Flood form finally noticed his presence and stopped its charge towards the medic and turned to face Johnson. As the distance closed, the infected Flood form swung wildly at him.

Johnson ducked underneath the blow, twisting his body into a sharp pivot and used his momentum to bury the knife into the chest of the infected host body. The creature shuddered uncontrollably as Johnson ripped through the weakened flesh, ensuring he would rip the small

infectious form inside the chest cavity to pieces. With a cry he rammed his shoulder into the Flood form, sending it skidding across the floor where it finally came to a stop, motionless.

"You alright?" Johnson asked, gazing down at the medic. With a groan the medic raised a hand slowly to his head.

"Those bastards know how to pack a punch," he said with a wry grin. His body shuddered as a coughing fit wracked him. The medic coughed roughly one last time and his hand came away from his mouth covered in blood.

Johnson looked at the blood in concern as he heard the familiar screams of the Flood begin to fill the room.

"Alright we've got to go, now!" Johnson shouted, unceremoniously hoisting the medic to his feet, ignoring the grunt of pain the injured soldier emitted. Sergeant Johnson turned back to the cabinet that Jan had crawled out of.

"W-what's going on?" Jan asked shakily.

"Two stupid soldiers decided to come rescue you," Johnson said as he looped one of the medic's arms around his shoulder. "Now get your ass over here and help me get him back to the roof."

Without a word Jan woozily climbed to her feet and after a few uncertain steps she came to a stop beside the medic, and took his remaining arm and looped it over hers.

"Your going to have to carry most of the weight Jan, I'll need my arm in case more Flood happen to come looking for us," Johnson explained as he uncomfortably gripped one of the sub-machine guns in his hand, careful to keep the medic's arm from slipping off from around his neck.

Together Jan and Sergeant Johnson half dragged the injured medic down the twisting hallways of the hospital ward. They had to stop every few minutes so Johnson could fire at the sporadic infectious forms that were crawling along the walls.

"Why did you come back for me?" Jan asked after a long period of silence. Johnson responded without taking his eyes from the door that would take them into the staircase leading towards the roof.

"Can we talk about this after we ain't got these parasite bastards crawling around us?" Johnson asked annoyed. Jan looked away, a hurt look passing over her face that Johnson noticed.

"Shit," he cursed. "Look, I never thought the Flood would actually head for the hospital. I figured you'd be able to wait this whole thing out in a Goddamn hospital without having to worry about fighting. I fucked up, and I had to make things right. If it meant pulling your corpse out of this shit-hole I woulda done it without question."

Jan tried to respond, but the medic began another coughing fit as the door before them suddenly exploded outwards towards them. Infectious forms spilled out from the staircase, followed by several infected Flood hosts.

"Shit!" Johnson cursed as the unhinged door cracked against his waist, propelling him backwards. Jan kept a grip on the medic as Johnson tumbled backwards to the ground, the SMG he held clattered down the length of the hallway. Fighting against the pain he quickly pushed himself up, in time to see the horde of infectious forms swarm over Jan and the medic.

"Johnson!" Jan screamed out before she disappeared from view.

Driven by the raw fear and rage that flooded his body, Johnson charged into the massive pile of creatures, the knife he had used earlier in his lone hand, ripping the infectious forms apart.

"Jan!" Johnson cried, hoping to hear a response. None came as one of the Flood combat forms crashed into Johnson, trying to wrestle him to the ground. Dropping down Johnson used the knife in an upward motion that severed the arm holding onto him, and then proceeded to kick the feet out from underneath the combat form.

"Sonofabitch!" Johnson raged, forgetting any attempts at self-preservation and throwing himself headfirst into the pile of infectious forms, crushing many of them underneath his body. Haphazardly Johnson grasped for Jan, his arm cupping underneath her breasts and dragging her under his body.

Acting quickly Johnson scanned her neck for any signs of an entry wound by one of the infectious forms. With the quick look Johnson didn't see anything indicating she had been infected, so with a quick jerk he pulled himself and Jan upwards. Jan had apparently fainted from the shock of her impending death, forcing Johnson to carry her.

"I'm sorry," Sergeant Johnson said softly as he began to pull Jan away. With only one arm available, he wouldn't be able to risk trying to take the medic as well. Mercifully the medic had fallen into unconsciousness, letting him escape his painful death at the hands of the Flood.

Againâ€¦|again another soldier dies because of meâ€¦|

Johnson could feel the remaining Flood a hairsbreadth away from him, and he quickly dragged Jan to where the SMG he had been carrying landed. Reaching down Johnson scooped the weapon up and turned, emptying the magazine without any real care of what he was hitting. He just needed to get the closest ones off his back for a minute.

Fuck, with the staircase blocked, the only way out is in the elevator, and I'm not dumb enough to try that.

In an attempt to buy himself some time to think, Johnson quickly dragged Jan into one of the patient rooms, slamming the door behind him. Wasting no time he set Jan against the far wall and grabbed as much random debris he could handle with one arm, setting it up against the door.

"Shit," Johnson cursed softly as the Flood began to throw themselves against the door leading into the room. They were safe for now, but the Flood would break that door down in a minute. With no weapons,

Johnson could only hold them off for so long before they would eventually be overrun by their superior numbers.

Observing the room urgently for anything useful, Johnson's eyes settled on the far window located at the other end of the room. Striding purposely towards it, Sergeant Johnson peered out and down below.

Seven floorsâ€|I doubt even I'd be able to survive that, let alone Jan. Damnit, there has to be something we can do. Maybe call the Marines on the rooftop?

Johnson listened carefully, but with the repeated thrashings and screams of the Flood on the other side of the door, he couldn't tell if the Marines were still fighting on the rooftop.

Its not like they'd be able to get here in time anyways.

That thought gave him an idea though, and he quickly accessed his radio, flipping through the channels until he found the one used for communicating with airborne assistance.

"This is Sergeant Johnson. I'm currently pinned down on the seventh floor of the hospital. Looks like I'll need immediate dust-off, but we're gonna have to make this pick-up a little unorthodox."

"Sir?" the pilot's voice questioned over the com channel.

"I've got no clue which side of the building I'm on, but I'll give you a signal in a minute. Keep an eye out for it," Johnson ordered and then walked over to where the hospital bed lay. He quickly ripped the mattresses away, and began to pull at the frame. With only one arm however, it would be almost impossible to throw the object at the window with enough force to break it. He was going to need some help.

Turning Johnson walked over to Jan's spot against the wall and bent down.

"Sorry girl, we don't have time for pleasantries."

Drawing his hand back Johnson backhanded Jan roughly across the face, nearly knocking the girl against the ground.

"Shit!" Jan cursed loudly, seemingly recovered from her unconscious state. "What the hell was that for?"

"A fine way to treat the guy who's still trying to save your ass," Johnson ground out. "Get your ass off the floor and come help me toss this that bed frame through the window."

While Jan seemed confused over what Johnson was planning, she picked up on the sound of the Flood slamming against the flimsy metal door that separated them. Quickly getting to her feet she moved to the side of the bed frame and helped tear it free from the metal fasteners on the ground. It weighed easily close to a couple hundred pounds, and carrying it proved quite difficult.

Jan was positioned at the side, keeping her body positioned slightly underneath the bed frame, which they had managed to lift nearly three

feet off the ground. Johnson stood at the opposite side, facing Jan. Despite only having one arm he had managed to lift it as high as Jan.

"Let's not bother with any kind of countdown," Jan managed to grind out between her clenched jaw. Johnson had seen the sickening bruises that had formed on Jan's forearms, and knew that as hard as it was to lift the frame with a single arm, Jan must have been feeling it even worse.

"Agreed," Johnson wheezed, and simultaneously they charged at the window. With only several feet between the window and them, they hadn't gained much momentum when the bed frame struck the window, but the sheer weight of the object was enough to break through the hardened glass. The bed frame sailed down the seven stories before finally slamming into the pavement down below.

"I got your signal Sergeant," the pilot informed Johnson over the com channel. "Moving into place as we speak. You'll need to make a little bit of a leap however, my birds not exactly made for these kinds of picks."

"Understood," Johnson said, turning to Jan. "We're going to have to jump onto the Pelican when it's in place. Think you can make it?"

"To get out of this place Sergeant, I'd sprout wings and fly away," Jan said bitterly. Johnson noticed her depressed demeanor, but before he could say anything the Flood assault against the door finally gained purchase. A large tear down the center of the door had appeared, the metal pushed inward towards them. It wasn't large enough for anything to slip through, but it did give both Sergeant Johnson and Jan a good view at what was about to come in.

"If you happen to be going slow on our account Corporal," Johnson said over the com channel to the pilot of the Pelican, "Then I assure you the faster you go, the happier we will be."

"Keep your pants on Sergeant, if you want me to misjudge this then I'll hurry, but then you'll wind up smeared on the pavement," the pilot responded irritably.

Johnson sighed as the com channel clicked off.

"When the Pelicans are in position, you're going first," Johnson said. Jan looked at him and within her gaze he could see she was about to protest, but instead she simply nodded and looked away.

The hospital room began to tremble slightly as the sounds of the Pelican's engines soon dwarfed the Flood's assault. As the pilot began to maneuver the open bay of the Pelican into position, the door leading into the room finally gave way. The Flood had managed to use the small tear in the door to rip it free from the hinges that held it in place. Infectious forms began to crawl over the random debris Johnson had positioned against the door to halt their progress.

"Get ready to jump!" Johnson shouted at Jan as he bent down and picked up a twisted metal bar that had been torn free from the bed frame when they had removed it from the fasteners located on the ground. As the infectious forms jumped towards him, heading for his neck, Johnson swung, batting them away and tearing them apart in

mid-air.

The Pelican finally came to a slow hover outside the window and Jan looked back at Johnson uncertainly.

"Just fucking jump!" Johnson snarled angrily as the last of the debris before the door was pushed aside and the combat forms entered. Out of the corner of his eye Sergeant Johnson saw Jan take a running charge at the window. She slipped on some of the glass that had fallen on the inside of the hospital room and she fell short, hitting the end ramp of the Pelican painfully, but managed to grasp onto a small handle used for tying down the cables used to carry Warthogs.

As Jan pulled herself up into the Pelican bay, Johnson took one final swing with the metal shrapnel and then turned, already fearing that he had let the combat forms get too close. Pumping his legs he ran towards the window, his heavy boots crunching on the glass that Jan had stumbled on. With only a few inches to spare Johnson jumped. As he cleared the broken window he felt time slow, his adrenalin spiking.

His jump had been better timed than Jan's, and it looked like he would easily enter the back of the Pelican when something grabbed onto his foot, impeding his forward progress. Speechless Johnson felt himself begin to fall, even as he recognized that it was a tentacle'd arm that held onto his foot. His mind went blank and he prepared himself for the long fall when Jan's outstretched hand caught onto his upper arm. The downward plunge stopped abruptly, as Johnson found himself suspended in mid-air; held in a tug of war between the Flood combat form that still resided in the hospital room, and Jan who was half inside the Pelican.

To keep herself from falling Jan had hooked her foot into the same handle located along the floor of the Pelican ramp that she had used to pull herself up on before. Both her hands were grasping Johnson's arm as the combat form had only its one remaining arm holding onto one of Johnson's leg.

As he twisted around Sergeant Johnson saw that it was the same combat form he had attacked earlier. The creature possessed only one arm, and the knife Johnson had used to cut the other limb off with was impaled in its mutated skull.

Surprising him, Jan moved one of her hands from Johnson's arm, giving the combat form significant leverage to pull more of him backwards, in turn extending Jan's body further outside of the Pelican.

Preparing to rebuke her over the foolish maneuver, Johnson saw that Jan had used her free hand to reach into the waist holster he had left in the Pelican after being picked up from New Mombasa. Her hand reappeared and in her grip she held an M6C handgun, and she quickly trained it on the combat form.

The gun fired six times, emptying half the clip before the combat form's grip finally loosened around Johnson's foot. Jan fell backward heavily, with Johnson banging into the ramp of the Pelican bay much in the same manner that Jan had previously. With his hand in Jan's grip however, he was in no danger of falling and she quickly pulled

him inside.

"Get us the hell out of here," Johnson shouted to the pilot, who had been watching the scene unfold with rapt attention. The Pelican rumbled as it tore away from the hospital.

Sergeant Johnson and Jan sat back against the seats lined along the walls of the Pelican and attempted to catch their breaths. The wounded Marines that had been picked up from before were lying in varying states of unconsciousness on the floor of the Pelican.

Turning to Jan, Johnson grinned.

"Not bad for a rescue huh?"

Jan looked at him blankly for a moment before smiling back slightly as the Pelican carried them away from the hospital, the Flood, and the fighting.

"Construct we shall need to establish contact with Councilor Pondomee's ship," the Arbiter informed Cortana as _Honor Without Mercy_ waited several thousand miles away from the small personal craft that had emerged from Slip Space only moments before.

Cortana was silent as she worked her way into the ship's communication network and set up a link with the _Attrition_.

"Go ahead, you'll have a visual in a moment," Cortana's voice filled the bridge, and the main display altered. Instead of the empty wreckage of the Jiralhanae fleet, the occupants of the bridge now had a view of the cockpit inside the _Attrition_.

"I would speak with High Councilor Pondomee," the Arbiter informed the Sangheili pilot over the battle net.

The pilot seemed to get his first good look at the display inside his own ship that allowed him a view of the bridge inside _Honor Without Mercy_.

"An Arbiter?" the pilot said in astonishment, before breaking himself from the reverie that had descended upon him. "Arbiter, Councilor Pondomee is with the rest of our forces on Danrun. He has sent I, Lan 'Eranumee on a mission to inform our brethren of the dire straights we face."

"So the betrayal has become complete then?" the Arbiter asked sadly. "The Prophets have ordered our extinction even upon the world we established with them?"

"Yes," 'Eranumee responded, his voice tight. "The Jiralhanae have led the assault against the Sangheili positions. The Lekgolo and Unggoy are fighting by our sides, but even with their help, the Jiralhanae possess the Forerunner vessels. It is only a matter of time before the defenses are destroyed."

The Arbiter clenched his fists, even as he felt his strength begin to drain. He had hoped that word could reach the Sangheili and other

excommunicated Covenant members of the betrayal on the Holy Ring, but it was not to be. The Forerunner ships were vastly superior to anything the Covenant had been capable of developing. A fleet of a hundred cruisers could be destroyed by one Forerunner craft.

"I must say Arbiter," 'Eranumee said, his voice growing suspicious, "You are in very interesting company. Why is it that I see a Holy Oracle, and the Demon beside you?"

"There are far more changes that have occurred than simply our betrayal at the hands of the Covenant young one," the Arbiter said. "We have no time for talk, I shall escort you to Silone, and there we shall both inform the elders of the messages we carry."

'Eranumee's face still showed his suspicion, but he nodded assent to the Arbiter's words and the display switched off.

"Bring us into the coordinates I gave you earlier Construct, and hurry," the Arbiter ordered. In moments _Honor Without Mercy _began to turn and slowly headed towards the home world of the Sangheili.

"This is something we should have foreseen," the Arbiter said, turning to gaze at the Master Chief. "Your presence will cause doubt and mistrust when we arrive. Some of the elders are old and not flexible on ancient beliefs. We shall be lucky if you are not ordered to be executed the moment they lay eyes upon us."

With a simple shrug of his shoulders the Master Chief responded.

"While you have proven yourselves to be quite ignorant in the past," the Spartan said, earning a hardened glare from many of the Sangheili that operated along the bridge, "I know your kind are not stupid. Think what you will about the human race, but we are offering an alliance that will help you fight against the Covenant. Fighting a two-front war would be inconceivable, even for the Covenant."

"Let us hope you are right," the Arbiter replied. "Hopefully with the assistance of this 'Eranumee, we shall force the council to see the truth."

If not, the Arbiter mused darkly, _the Gods may bestow upon us a fate worse than that which the Forerunners met._

The Prophets had long since overcome the problem that many other species met in regards to aging. With the genetic manipulation and mutation of their very core of existence, the Prophets had surpassed the limitations that time could put upon a single body. In doing so the Prophet race had begun to decelerate the aging process, ensuring that though time passed at the same rate, their bodies would only age at a small fraction of that speed.

The High Prophet of Truth was birthed during the Age of Reconciliation, thousands of years prior to the Age of Reclamation. Compared to the highest Prophet however, the Grand High Prophet of Law, he was an infant. The Prophet of Law had been an experimental

project by the Forerunners, shortly before the destruction on their home planet, and the activation of the Halo's.

Despite his age, Truth felt the urge to run back into the Forerunner ship, regardless of his brittle bones. The Forerunner stood stoically, having moved significantly closer to the group of Covenant forces standing upon the sand dunes that marked the expansive desert area they had embarked upon after exiting the Forerunner ship.

Off to the right side of Truth, the Jiralhanae Captain stared at the foreign being in shock, after the Prophet of Truth had chokingly informed him that one of the Holy Forerunners stood before them, examining the group as if it were a collected group of insects.

"Exalted one," the Jiralhanae Captain said to Truth, "How can that creature be a Forerunner? It is in the Holy Writ that the Forerunner ascended upon the Great Journey, leaving behind this universe and all who dwelt in it."

"Such idiocies should not be uttered here," Truth said angrily. "You will do well to tread lightly, if this Forerunner decides we are in the least manner a threat, it shall tear us to pieces."

The heavy winds tore at the group, kicking up the sand they stood upon and assaulting the collected Covenant members. A few feet away from the group the Forerunner's flowing robes billowed, exposing the long blade it held concealed within the left sleeve of its robes. Several of the Kig-Yar and Jiralhanae tensed at the sight and shifted uneasily.

"Don't move!" Truth shouted at them, his voice harried with his uneasiness. The raw fear that flooded within his body disrupted any thoughts of keeping his composure and stature amongst the lower Covenant. His thoughts were kept on ensuring his survival.

The warning he shouted came too late though, and before any of the collected Covenant could detect, the Forerunner was gone. Several tense moments passed and Truth released the breath he had been holding. The Forerunner must have been surprised and disappeared while it collected itself.

Perhaps we are in luck. Should the Forerunner fail to reappear, we may finally figure out how to reactivate the ship's engines and be rid of this cursed planet, and all the horrors that dwell within it. All is not lost.

The Prophet of Truth's thoughts were interrupted as a Kig-Yar released a strangled cry as it fell, the upper half of its body hitting the sand. A shimmer of light was all Truth could see before two other Kig-Yar fell to the ground, their bodies dismembered in one form or another.

"Return to the ship at once!" Truth cried, even as he knew it was too late. The wind had picked up again, and their vision was impaired from the blowing winds, ensuring that they would not be able to see the Forerunner ship unless they were standing directly before it.

Regardless Truth ran, his ears picking up each cry as the other

Covenant began to fall, one by one.

This is madness! The Grand Prophet of Law foresaw none of these events when he laid out the architecture of our stratagem. The Forerunner were in reclusion! Why? Why have they been awoken?

The touch of a blade upon his neck stopped the Prophet of Truth's maddening pace, and he froze, his eyes desperately trying to fixate on the form behind him. The lone Forerunner that had dispatched the other Covenant members stood firmly, the tip of it's blade pressed lightly against Truth's flesh.

"Know this, the only reason this blade has yet to pierce your flesh is because I remember your kind," the Forerunner spoke, using the tongue of the ancients. "You would do well to answer my questions; otherwise you will join your companions."

Captain Miranda Keyes felt the beginnings of a severe headache as she marched down the empty corridor inside the_ Lewis Puller._ Sergeant Johnson had radioed in ten minutes prior and informed her that not only was he dropping off a Pelican filled with wounded, but that he was also giving her Jan to look after as well. After Ackerson's ship entered Slip Space the communications within the entire fleet had been disrupted, and Keyes had spent several long hours without any form of updates from a single one of her teams down on the ground.

Needless to say the stress was starting to get to her.

I can understand Admiral Hood's reasoning in not wanting to hand this new cruiser over to a fresh corpse straight out of officer training, but why on Earth did he have to give it to me? I had enough trouble keeping track of a couple hundred crewmen aboard In Amber Clad.

The doors leading into the Medical Bay parted before her and Keyes stepped inside, quickly waving down the salutes some of the corpsmen began to give her.

"Sergeant Johnson?" Keyes asked one of the surgeons, who in turn pointed down near the end of the room. Thanking him, Miranda walked softly down to the far end of the medical bay. She stumbled upon Johnson and Jan quite quickly. Jan was having her arms examined and bandaged by one of the male corpsmen while Johnson stood off to the side, his face a mixture of concern and brooding.

"Well I certainly didn't expect this," Miranda admitted, startling both Jan and Johnson. The corpsmen glanced up briefly at her before resuming his work.

"Ma'am," Johnson said, snapping a salute, and Keyes was taken aback when she saw he was forced to use his left arm seeing as how his right arm was no longer present. Looking over at Jan, she noticed the darkened bruises on the girl's arms, and the distant gaze she possessed.

"What the hell happened?" Keyes asked. Johnson glanced wearily at Jan

for a moment before sighing.

"It's a long story ma'am, it'd be best if we went somewhere private to talk about it first."

"I see, so the Spartans are dead," Captain Keyes said softly, leaning back in the small chair inside her private quarters. "And that another Gravemind showed up as well, that is certainly surprising."

"Yes ma'am," Johnson replied from his position, seated upon the edge of Keyes' cot.

"How on Earth was it able to cause the dormant Flood DNA inside of you to take over though?" Keyes wondered aloud. "The Boren's Syndrome should have ensured something like that to be impossible."

Johnson was silent as Keyes thought aloud.

"Perhaps when you fought the previous Gravemind, and your arm was first severed it was able to do something to the severed limb," Keyes pondered. "When it was reattached your body almost rejected it, and it took several Elites to hold you down so you wouldn't hurt yourself."

"I blacked out when the limb first began to reattach itself," Johnson admitted.

"Well its simple conjecture on my part," Miranda said, leaning forward. "Unfortunately as well, since the information about your compatibility with the Flood is a secret, we cannot trust any of ONI's scientists to examine you. For now it seems like all of our questions will have to remain as such."

Which obviously doesn't sit well with Johnson, Miranda thought as she stared at the soldier. _And why should it? I don't think I'd take it well if I found out that without notice I might suddenly be torn apart from the insides and become one of the Flood._

Johnson's brooding face finally got to Keyes and she got up to go comfort him when the internal com network for the ship activated and the voice of the executive officer filled the room.

"Captain Keyes, Admiral Lord Hood is waiting for you in the east docking bay. He has informed me that he wishes to meet with you alone, and as soon as possible."

"Admiral Hood?" Keyes said in surprise. "When did he come aboard? I wanted to be informed of any developments, damnit."

"My apologies ma'am," the XO replied. "But we just received word of his arrival only moments ago. It seems with the communications disruption he was unable to send us word ahead of time."

"Ah, I see," Keyes said. "Please tell the Admiral that I will be with him in a moment." She turned to Johnson, who was still seated staring down at the ground. Struggling to find some way to console the Marine, Keyes sighed and walked out of the

room.

"Ah, Captain Keyes, a pleasure to see you again," Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood exclaimed as Keyes walked down the ramp leading into the docking bay. Admiral Hood was standing before the Pelican he had arrived in with his hands folded behind his back.

"Likewise sir," Miranda responded. "Would you like to go somewhere more accommodating sir?"

Admiral Hood laughed and shook his head.

"No, no this conversation shouldn't take too long," he smiled sadly. "I'm afraid my coming here is going to have to remain a bit of a secret for now Captain Keyes, the only other person outside of this ship that knows about what I'm going to discuss is General Strauss."

"Sir?" Keyes asked, confused.

"While I'm sure the actions of our Marines on the ground have been courageous, the truth of the matter is that the Flood have been spreading faster than we could ever have predicted. Africa has been overrun, and the concentration around New Mombasa is staggering. Over seven million Marine infantrymen have been deployed planet-side, but after only several hours, the Flood are already outnumbering us," Admiral Hood explained, his voice grave.

"How could that be possible sir? The Flood arrived in seven Covenant capital ships, while they certainly could have stuffed a large number into them, there's no way they could possibly reproduce so quickly," Keyes protested.

"That is what the council figured as well, but we were wrong. All preliminary damage estimates have been off by almost tenfold. Captain," Hood said intently, "We are going to lose this battle, and when we do, there won't be anything left of humanity."

Keyes stared back at Admiral Hood, speechless.

"Fortunately," Hood continued, "ONI has several evacuation procedures they'll be implementing shortly. While the specific areas we will be evacuating too in the latter areas of this battle haven't been specified as of yet, know that they will take us far from Earth, the Covenant, and all other dangers we've been facing lately. Will they follow us? Damned if I know, but we humans haven't exactly been on a winning streak lately have we?"

"How does this relate to the Lewis Puller, sir?" Keyes asked. A ghost of a smile passed Hood's face.

"I'm glad you haven't lost the down-to-Earth attitude Miranda," Admiral Hood said, then winced at his choice of words. His hands came out from behind his back and handed Keyes a small data disc.

"That disc contains all the coordinates we were given by the Arbiter and everything else we were able to glean from the Covenant ship before they left," Hood explained. "With it, you should be able to

track down the Master Chief and Cortana."

"Sir, I can't just abandon Earth," Keyes said earnestly. "Please, I want to stay and fight."

"Officially," Hood continued, oblivious to Keyes' plea, "You will be given the mission of tracking down and apprehending the fugitive Ackerson. This information will be given to the rest of ONI in twenty four hours time, should ONI even still exist then. Unofficially you are to link up with the Master Chief and assist him along with the Arbiter in whatever mission they are currently carrying out."

Keyes began to protest once more but Hood silenced her with a raised hand.

"I know this must be disconcerting for you, but you have a duty to mankind, not just Earth. When the evacuation procedures begin, the Flood will most certainly follow, and I am equally sure that the Covenant will track us down in time as well," Hood informed her. "Whoever we manage to evacuate from Earth will be a distraction. Hopefully we can lead the Flood and the Covenant on a chase and strand them somewhere, take away a large enough chunk from whatever they've got left. If we can manage that then it'll be all the more easy for the excommunicated Covenant members to eliminate the Covenant and the Flood."

"Your duty, Captain Keyes," Hood said intently, "Is to survive. I'm not sure what fate has in store for those of us on Earth, but I am certain long lives is not one of the options. After this is all said and done, you and the crew aboard this ship are going to be all that's left of humanity."

Admiral Hood smiled one last time and turned away, walking towards the Pelican. As he entered through the open bay door, he cast one final glance at Keyes before heading into the cockpit.

Miranda watched blankly as the Pelican roared to life and lifted away from the hanger, taxiing down the long corridor that led to the air lock. Once the ship disappeared from view, Keyes became aware of the data chip that rested in her hands.

Abandon Earth, and the rest of humanity? All so mankind can survive on a hope and a prayer that we can manage to defeat the Covenant and the Flood. An enemy we that nearly wiped us off the face of existence, and an enemy not even an advanced race like the Forerunner could defeat.

We've lostâ€¦|

The Chiroptera ship winked into existence, the small Slip Space tear closing itself immediately as the small craft passed through.

Dr. Catherine Halsey sat before the controls of the ship, her hands deftly moving over the controls as she brought the Chiroptera craft into a slow bank. The ship turned and steered itself towards the large Gas Giant positioned near the end of the system, and the research station that orbited around it.

Sighing to herself Dr. Halsey switched the controls over to autopilot and stepped down from the cockpit, moving into the small cargo hold.

"It looks like we made it," she said, leaning slightly against the door jam.

"So the monitor wasn't lying when it said we'd need to upgrade before we could continue on," SPARTAN -087 said, lifting the helmet from her MJOLNIR suit and placing it upon her head. The fastening gears hissed as the suit locked itself together.

"I'm not sure if the monitors are even programmed to be capable of uttering a mistruth," Dr. Halsey admitted as Kelly got to her feet. Reaching up Dr. Halsey removed her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose, trying to massage away the pressure that had slowly built. The Slip Space transit had been tense, and she wasn't sure if they would exit and find themselves facing a Covenant armada.

"Since we've arrived should we release the monitor from stasis, Doctor?" Kelly asked, bending down and stretching, attempting to work out all the kinks that had developed from the prolonged immobility.

"Yes," Dr. Halsey nodded. "While I'm certain I can handle any Covenant and human computing system, I have little experience working with whatever the Forerunner used."

"Let's hope it's a little more friendly this time," Kelly said, and Halsey felt a small smile grow on her face.

"I'm certain we can give it enough incentive to cooperate this time," she said. "I doubt spending several days incapable of movement was enjoyable, and we can just as easily keep it locked up for even longer."

Kelly nodded in reply and moved to the far end of the hold. Tapping in a few commands on a small terminal a panel on the wall opened, and revealed the source of their conversation.

The small orb-like monitor hovered, surrounded in a dark green light which contrasted against its deep black color. Kelly looked at Halsey for a moment and the Doctor nodded.

"Do it."

Another series of commands typed into the terminal and the green light dimmed. The monitor shook itself slightly and moved out of the small compartment.

"I cannot even begin to describe how many protocols you have disrupted and ignored," the monitor said, annoyance thick within its tone. "Simply by removing me from my station is in violation ofâ€|"

"Please," Dr. Halsey said, interrupting the monitor's tirade. "We can go over that at another time. Right now it looks like we're going to need your help."

"And why would I help two ignorant Reclaimers like yourself?" the

monitor asked. Dr. Halsey smiled darkly and stepped close to the monitor.

"Because," Halsey said, "Atoning Deviant, if you assist us now in our endeavor. We will help you with your 'containment' problems."

****Author's Notes:** Hmm, does everyone remember where we last saw Atoning Deviant? If you don't remember, go check out the last chapter of the Covenant History section.**

****So now Halsey and Kelly are in the story, which should probably stem the demands of everyone. What exactly are they doing however? And why would Halsey be willing to help the monitor when it so obviously is concerned with simply activating the Halo's?***

****For those wondering how any Forerunner could still possibly be alive, play the games and read the books and some of the interviews with Bungie. There are subtle hints, very very very subtle, but they're there, right beneath your nose.*****

****I'll try and get to work on Chapter 20 as soon as possible. Hopefully we won't have another month-long wait on our handsâ€|****

21. The End of a War Chapter 20

****Author's Notes:** We're heading into the final stretch here. Not much left. Maybe five chapters plus an epilogue.**

****I realize there hasn't been much forthcoming in the spectrum of shedding light on the many...many different plotlines. This of course can be quite frustrating for people, especially for those who have been around since the start. Nine months is a long time to wait.*****

****Thankfully you can take to heart that I'm not one to leave any plotlines open, or unresolved. ****

****This story will definitely be finished in a somewhat satisfying manner. Take from that what you will.*****

****The End of a War****

****Chapter 20****

****Where's the Welcoming Party...?*****

Honor Without Mercy thrummed with power as it descended through the upper layers of atmosphere that covered the Sangheili home world of Silone. As the dense clouds parted before the massive flagship, the regional distinctions became clearer. In contrast to the industrialized planet of Danrun, Silone was covered in a lush, natural beauty. Much of the landscape lay untouched; a symbol of the heritage and honor the Sangheili gave their birthplace.

From the bridge of the Covenant flagship, the Arbiter watched his

home world as a myriad of emotions ran through him. This planet was where he was birthed, and grew up, learning the ancient beliefs of the Covenant, and the pivotal role that the Sangheili played. He had also spent much of his youth learning of the Sangheili history, of what their way of life was before the introduction of the Forerunners and the Great Journey. Such memories brought a sense of nostalgia to the Arbiter.

His time on Silone was also where he had learnt of his father, and his many heroics in battle. He learnt of Gao Kinlumee's passing as well, perishing during the Taming of the Hunters. His father had been requisitioned as the Commanding Officer during the Lekgolo uprising, leading the forces of the Covenant into beating down the insurgency the rampant creatures attempted to inflect upon the Covenant.

As a child the Arbiter had received much attention while he grew up. The offspring of a famed commander, and an orphan after both his father and mother passed on. It was a rare event to have both parents pass away, leaving a Sangheili child to be raised by the Councilors.

The last memories the Arbiter possessed of Silone was that of pride. He had excelled at his studies, and shown his worth as a master tactician in understanding the intricacies of space travel, and the use of the Covenant war ships. From there he had been taken to Danrun, where the Arbiter began his training to become the fleet commander he once was.

And yet, the Arbiter mused. _All that I spent my youth studying, training, and obsessing over was for nothing. It was all a lie, a fabrication on the part of the Prophets. The shame I felt after the destruction of the first Halo, and the humiliation that came afterwards, all of it was for nothing._

Returning to Silone was bittersweet. He had left filled with devotion for the Covenant, for the Great Journey, and now he was returning intent on rallying the Sangheili for war against the Covenant. To unify them with the remaining human race, to whom the Sangheili had spent many years fighting with unyielding fury.

"Arbiter," one of the Sangheili spoke from his position before the navigation terminal. "Our landing zone has been cleared, though the officer in the dry docks wishes for us to allow the _Attrition _to land first."

The Arbiter considered that for a moment. Allowing the _Attrition _to dock first would guarantee that the pilot 'Eranumee, would have plenty of time to fill the Sangheili Commanders in on what was transpiring on Danrun. Not a bad thing necessarily, but the Arbiter was wary in trusting that the Sangheili pilot would not also let slip that inside _Honor Without Mercy_ an Arbiter was aboard, along with the Demon and a Holy Oracle from one of the Sacred Rings. The Demon's presence was something the Arbiter had not fully taken into account as of yet. Regardless of whatever words he spoke, the Sangheili would look upon the Demon as nothing more than their most fearsome of enemies.

Casting his gaze about the bridge, the Arbiter realized that the Demon was no longer there.

_Where could he have gone? _The Arbiter mused for a moment, before waving his hand dismissively at the Sangheili navigator.

"Send our acknowledgement," he instructed. "What we have to tell the Council will take a great deal of time, and I shall need to prepare before I visit with the elders."

Several decks below, the Master Chief emerged from a shadowed hallway, marching listlessly down the raised walkway that led into the main communications networking facility aboard the _Honor Without Mercy_. The metal deck beneath his armored feet clanked audibly as he moved, the sound alerting all those in the vicinity. Grunts, Elites, and even a pair of Hunters parted before the Spartan, allowing him to pass unheeded.

John could feel the wary eyes of the excommunicated Covenant members upon him, but he chose not to show any outward signs of notice. If all they wished to do was stare at him, he didn't mind. John had spent his entire life being stared at by soldiers, comrades, enemies...even his friends.

News of the ships arrival inside Silone had spread quickly throughout the creatures onboard, and a sense of relief tinged with apprehension seemed to have risen. John didn't share in any kind of relief. Only a few hours before, he had felt something; much like the feeling he got in battle when something was hiding from him, waiting to pounce. The Spartan was no stranger to abnormal paranoia. A soldier needed to stay alert on and off the battlefield, something COP Mendez had drilled into his head throughout the long, arduous training process so many years ago.

The feeling had only seemed to intensify as time went on, and John had excused himself from the bridge. The uneasy feeling.

Honor Without Mercy was of a very grandiose design, with its many twisting hallways and open courtyards. The Prophet of Mercy seemed to have liked all the pomp and circumstance that came with being a hierarch, and saw fit to design his personal vessel as he saw fit. The ship was nearly double the size of the UNSC halcyon-class cruisers.

The communications relay room bled off into another series of corridors, John stepped through another set of double-sliding doors, and he emerged inside the enormous ceremonial chamber that the Prophet of Mercy had used to deliver sermons to the inhabitants of the ship. The chamber had also been the scene of the battle between Sergeant Johnson and Gravemind. Judging from the amount of debris and body parts, there hadn't been much of an effort to clean the place.

Stepping carefully through the wreckage, John came to a stop before the large viewing porthole that had been cut into the western wall of the chamber, allowing the occupants to gaze out into space. The view granted to the Master Chief was of the Eastern sector of the Sangheili capital city, Corinphi. He was taken aback shortly, as the seemingly archaic design of the buildings and structures stood out proudly within the city.

"Beautiful isn't it?" Cortana's voice filtered down throughout the chamber. John knew through enough dealings with the A.I that trying to locate her was pointless, so he remained gazing out at the city.

"It's certainly different than I imagined," John admitted.

"I've dug up as many mentions of the Elite home world that I can find in the ship's databanks, and from what I could gather it would seem the Elite High Council wished for their original way of life on the planet to continue; even as they became assimilated into the Covenant," Cortana informed him. "Using some of _Honor Without Mercy'_s scanners I was able to detect several stationary plasma cannons however. They seem to be placed in positions that would be capable of protecting individual cities, instead of the planet itself. It would appear the Elite's didn't expect to find themselves facing an invasion force any time soon."

"They'll likely come to regret that soon," John replied. "If this planet is so limited in Covenant technology, then did we make a mistake by coming here?"

"Oh there's plenty of ships," Cortana said quickly. "Some of the orbital star ports around the planet look like they could service hundreds of Covenant carriers. Regardless of that fact, I don't think the Arbiter would have been willing to go along unless we alerted his people first."

For all the good that seems to be doing, John mentally grumbled. His gaze slipped past the city and settled on the horizon.

"Have there been any transmissions from Earth?" he asked.

"Nothing yet," Cortana informed him. "Even using HGB burst transmissions it will likely take almost a week for any transmissions sent from Earth to reach us. There's plenty of ground for them to travel before they get here."

John grunted back in return, folding his arms across his chest as Honor Without Mercy began drifting further closer to the ground.

"Chief," Cortana's voice said hesitantly. "I've configured our landing vector and synched it with the autopilot. Do you think I could...?"

"Sure," John replied, "Is there a pedestal somewhere nearby?"

"By the collapsed section of the deck," Cortana said.

Shuffling his feet John turned and started back through the chamber, away from the large viewing window. He understood the apprehension Cortana felt when asking him to allow her back into his suit. It was always uncomfortable feeling someone else's presence inside your own mind, and to be the one doing the intruding must have been at least slightly unsettling.

It hadn't been long since John had once disliked Cortana's presence inside his suit. Since those first few moments of awkwardness

however, he had since begun to welcome Cortana's intrusion. She was an invaluable asset in battle, and had saved his life numerous times. Perhaps most important of all, Cortana was a voice that was with him, even when he felt completely isolated.

The pedestal platform appeared before the Master Chief and he set his palm upon the center. A flash of light and the feeling of warmth traveling through his body was the only indication that a foreign entity had entered his body.

"The Arbiter is preparing to dock, we should get back to the bridge," Cortana's voice said inside his helmet.

Without replying John turned deftly and stepped through the twisting rubble inside the chamber. As he reached the double-set doors, the Spartan cast one final glance at the Covenant city before leaving the room, never to set foot inside the ship ever again.

High Councilor Pondomee's ship, the Attrition, slowly settled down in the private docking bay afforded to the ship inside the large station that had been developed just outside of Corinphi. Lan 'Eranumee, the pilot, unclasped the helmet required for such small Covenant crafts, and stood. The other Sangheili aboard had already begun to debark, though without any set orders they were simply gathering before the ship as the Sangheili technicians hovered around.

'Eranumee took the chance to stretch his body. He had spent many days glued in the pilot's seat, and he had paid for it. With nothing but stimulants entering his system to keep him aware and alert, the prolonged consciousness seemed to be coming to a head, now that he was up and moving. With a growl he tried to push back the overwhelming exhaustion as he debarked from the ship, walking down the short gangplank (the Attrition had not been given a gravity lift due to its small size) to join the gathering of his shipmates.

It was only a few moments before 'Eranumee spotted an entire Sangheili guard detail approaching them. Taking the initiative he stepped forward from the collected soldiers and awaited the armed Sangheili, as they grew closer. The guards parted before 'Eranumee, and an elder stepped forward. He was decked out in ceremonial robes, and held his hands composed behind his back.

'Eranumee had been away from Silone for many cycles, but he remembered the actions required of an officer when meeting a fellow Sangheili elder. With a deft bow, the Sangheili pilot fell to his knees and placed his head near to the ground of the hanger bay. Behind him, 'Eranumee could sense the other Sangheili doing the same.

"You may rise," the Sangheili elder, said his tone even. He waited for the assembled Sangheili to get back up to their feet before continuing.

"I have heard the reports sent forth by your ship when you first entered this system. I must say they carry an unbelievable tone. As

well it would seem another ship; the Prophet of Mercy's flagship has entered our system as well and if the reports are to be believed an Arbiter is aboard, carrying a message very similar to the one that you have brought before us."

"Everything in my transmission is the truth my lord," 'Eranumee said earnestly. "The Arbiter's message I do not know, but I request a moment of your time to explain something I saw when speaking with him before I landed."

The Sangheili elder eyed 'Eranumee warily before nodding, and with a wave of his hand the guard detail dispersed, taking with them the other Sangheili warriors from the Attrition. Once they were relatively alone, the elder looked at him and wordlessly motioned for 'Eranumee to continue.

"Shortly after entering the system from the jump we made from Danrun, I received a hail from Honor Without Mercy. When a link had been set up with our ships, I was granted a view into the bridge of the ship. Aboard I could see not only an Arbiter, but a Holy Oracle as well," 'Eranumee informed the Elder, who looked surprised at the announcement.

"That is indeed troubling," the Elder said. "We had heard whispers of trouble at the location of the second Sacred Ring. Perhaps the Arbiter has brought us a message from the Prophets."

"I am afraid that might be the case," 'Eranumee conferred, before continuing hesitantly. "But, my Lord, there was one other presence on the bridge of the ship that startled me."

The docking bay began to tremble as the expansive outer doors near the far end of the chamber began to part, and Honor Without Mercy slowly pulled its way inside. 'Eranumee felt a slight sense of awe as he stared at the enormous ship. In the deep immensity of space, it was easy to overlook the sheer size of the crafts the Covenant used. The flagship was a monument to thousands of years of development and architecture within the Covenant.

"My Lord, I saw the Demon aboard the ship as well," 'Eranumee said suddenly.

"What?" the Elder snapped his head back around to glare at 'Eranumee in surprise. "Was he in captivity?"

"No sir," 'Eranumee replied. "He seemed to be moving freely about. I questioned the Arbiter and he said that there were more changes than just the Prophet's treachery."

"You should have said something earlier," the Elder grumbled. Turning he caught the eye of his guards and motioned towards Honor Without Mercy, which had just completed its docking maneuvers.

"Cover the gravity lift of that ship! The Demon is aboard!"

While the Elder had specifically been talking to his guard detail, the many other Sangheili in the dry docks heard this exclamation and stared at the large Covenant flagship in fear. As the guards quickly moved to cover the gravity lift, they were joined by many of the other Sangheili that had been aimlessly about inside the hanger.

A deep intensity gripped the occupants of the docking bay, and 'Eranumee moved closer to the Covenant flagship, hoping to catch sight of whatever action may take place. Pulsating power emerged from the ship as 'Eranumee came to a halt, and the bright purple energy filtered down from the small gravity lift. The tense atmosphere seemed to heighten as the first figure drifted down, soon followed by another.

The Sangheili 'Eranumee had identified before as the Arbiter was the first to come down the lift, and the second figure 'Eranumee recognized as well.

"Demon!" one of the guards bellowed, the energy blade at his side jumping to life. With a strangled cry the Sangheili charged at the armored human.

"Wait!" the Arbiter shouted, placing himself in front of the Demon and effectively cutting the two off. This fact did not seem to deter the Sangheili guard as he continued his charge. The Demon seemed to realize this before the Arbiter, and quickly shoved the sacred Sangheili off to the side, setting himself into a defensive stance.

The guard swung viciously, cutting through the air with a high arc, slicing through the position where the Demon had been standing a moment before. The Demon was no longer there however, much to 'Eranumee's surprise. He hadn't even seen the human move. The Sangheili guard had overextended himself with his swing, and the Demon grasped the arm that held the energy blade and with a simple chop the guard's hand cracked audibly. The energy blade fell to the ground, the concentrated plasma winking out of existence.

While the blade had fallen, the Demon was not immobile. He had twisted the Sangheili's arm further, locking it behind the guard's back. From the holster at his waist the Demon had removed a small handgun and placed it up against the underside of the guard's neck. The maneuver had occurred within the blink of an eye.

The entire docking bay seemed to be in shock over the amazing display of grace and deadly precision the Demon had just demonstrated for them. That surprise seemed to melt while the Arbiter pushed himself back up to his feet.

"Release him, Demon," the Arbiter said roughly. He had obviously disliked the rough treatment.

'Eranumee watched as the Demon slowly relinquished his hold on the Sangheili guard and stepped back, holstering the pistol. The guard cast an angry glare at the Demon as he cradled his injured hand.

"I apologize for the surprise," the Arbiter announced to the occupants of the docking bay. "It was not my intention for the Demon to arrive here in such a surprising manner, and I did not think you would have been alerted to his presence either."

That last remark seemed to be directed right at 'Eranumee, and he felt cowed for a moment under the direct anger that seemed to radiate from it.

"I understand the sense of confusion that must have arisen from this, but I do not have the time to explain things at the moment. I will need to speak with the Elder Council as soon as possible."

"You are right that this has arisen some confusion, Arbiter," the Elder that had spoken with 'Eranumee earlier said, his voice seemingly dripping with sarcasm, especially when saying the last word.

"I hadn't even realized that another Arbiter had been selected."

"Elder Forsun," the Arbiter replied, his scorn equally evident. 'Eranumee could easily tell there was tension between the two. "My selection as an Arbiter was appointed by the Prophet Hierarchs, and approved by the council on _High Charity_."

"All Arbiters' must be approved by the council on Silone before being integrated with the sacred armor you are now wearing," Elder Forsun pointed out.

"Whatever reservations you may have with my selection Councilor," the Arbiter said, his voice strained. "I ask that you bring them up when I am before the rest of the council. Once there I will answer whatever concerns you put before me."

'Eranumee watched as the two Sangheili stared each other down. Finally Elder Forsun scoffed and turned away.

"Come this way then, _Arbiter_," Forsun ordered. "The Demon will be taken into a holding cell while you explain your actions."

"No he will not," the Arbiter announced. Everyone inside the bay seemed quite surprised at this declaration, even the Demon himself.

"The matter is not for discussion," Elder Forsun said. "He is the enemy of our people, and he will not walk freely on this planet."

The Arbiter held his hands out to the side as he replied.

"The Demon is not here as my prisoner. He is an honored ambassador from Earth, and I will not allow you to disrespect him."

Judging from the looks on both Forsun and the Arbiters faces, the matter was going to quickly degenerate further. 'Eranumee took a short moment to curse silently to himself before he stepped from the collected Sangheili into the short open space between the two sacred Sangheili.

"My Lord," 'Eranumee said, nodding towards Forsun, then turning and doing the same to the Arbiter. "I will escort the Demon with a guard detail if that should prove helpful."

Forsun and the Arbiter glanced briefly at him before turning back to glare at each other.

"Fine," the Arbiter spat out. "Take me to the council Forsun."

'Eranumee released the breath he had been holding as Elder Forsun stalked away. Seeing how the dispute appeared to be over many of the Sangheili technicians began to filter away as well. Eranumee was about to turn when he felt the Arbiter pass by him.

"If he is harmed in any way, I will not be so forgiving as the Demon has shown himself to be," the Arbiter snarled coldly as he walked by.

The Sangheili pilot felt the tightly controlled rage within the Arbiter, and shuddered lightly. With a deep breath he turned, and came face to face with the Demon.

"Come along Demon, I shall take you wherever you wish to go," 'Eranumee said, hoping that his voice came out much stronger than he felt at the moment. He had spoken in the native Covenant tongue, believing the Demon to be in possession of translating software. The human had followed the Arbiter's order after all.

The Demon seemed to glare at him for a full thirty seconds before motioning for 'Eranumee to lead the way. It had felt much longer.

Ordering Forsun to take me here was the right thing to do, the Arbiter mused to himself as he stepped into large chamber. _But I wish there had been time to organize my thoughts._

The chamber was in much the same design as the Arbiter remembered it to be. When he had been much younger, his instructors had taken him and his fellow classmates to see the structure where the Elder Council of the Sangheili would meet and discuss the political upheavals of the planet.

Weathered stone was mostly present in the architecture of the building, and the fact that it still stood without many signs of decay was a testament to the Sangheili ancestors of the past. The chamber served dual purposes. For the majority of the time, the Elder Council would meet daily and discuss matters of importance and vote upon issues that were brought before them. At those times the chamber was open for public viewing, and the wide array of stone benches within the upper levels of the chamber were occupied by curious Sangheili. On rare occasions the chamber was converted into an interrogation room of sorts. At these times the public was not allowed access.

As the Arbiter glanced into the upper portion of the council chamber, he saw that there were many Sangheili filling the row upon row of seats. Whatever the Elder's may have thought about his appointment as an Arbiter, at least it seemed he would not be disbelieved outright.

"This council has been called to hear the words of the Arbiter, on the matter of the terribly distressing news that there has been a shift in the Covenant," an Elder the Arbiter recognized as Forsun's older brother announced from his seat amongst the other council members. The Arbiter searched his mind for a long moment but could not come up with the Elder's name.

But I do recall, that he is at least somewhat more understanding and beholden that Forsun is. Age has not dulled his mind like it has Forsun's, and that may be in my favor.

The crowd seemed civil as the Arbiter let his gaze slip into the higher areas of the chamber. Certainly much more civil than the last crowd he had been standing before.

"Elder Forsun you have the floor," Forsun's brother announced, much to the Arbiter's dismay.

It had been a long time since the Arbiter had seen the council in action. When a separate party (the Arbiter) was making a case before the council, that party would be forced to answer the questions put forth by a council member. No matter what the question may be, the Arbiter would be forced to answer the questions put forth by Elder Forsun, and judging by the small smirk working its way onto the Sangheili's face, he was going to have his work cut out for him.

"You may begin, Arbiter," Forsun said grandly.

Taking a moment to shoot a short look at Forsun, the Arbiter cleared his throat and began to recant the events that took place only a short while ago, but felt as if they were from another lifetime.

"Doctor, I don't think this station is completely devoid of life."

Dr. Catherine Halsey took a moment to survey the docking bay for a moment and saw what Kelly was referring to.

The entire orbital station had been much larger than it first appeared when their small ship had first entered the system. The many docking stations leant towards Halsey's belief that the station was of great importance to the Forerunner, and obviously was one of the reasons why the star chart had led her to this specific location.

On their approach it had appeared the station was abandoned, as there were no signs of activity within the lifeless husk. Once inside one of the many docking bays, that initial observation appeared to have been made prematurely.

Through the rather dimmed lighting provided in the docking bay, Halsey could see many scattered bodies amongst the wreckage spewed about. It was too dark to surmise exactly what those bodies were, but there was little doubt in Halsey's mind that they were Covenant. The thought that the Covenant may have found what they were seeking here chilled her slightly, but Halsey decided not to voice those thoughts aloud.

"Is there any we could turn the lights up?" Kelly asked as Dr. Halsey walked steadily down the gangplank provided by their small ship.

"Monitor?" Halsey asked Atoning Deviant. The monitor released a

somewhat dramatic sigh before floating down through the docking bay towards a set of terminals.

"What do you think the chances are that the Covenant just happened to have all keeled over dead?" Halsey intoned softly as she stepped over a rather large bloodstain.

Kelly slapped a fresh magazine into her MA5B assault rifle as she replied, "Not likely Doctor, there isn't just Covenant blood spilt around here."

Dr. Halsey tried to strain her eyes against the darkness to see if she could discern what Kelly had seen, at the exact moment Atoning Deviant seemed to have found the lighting controls. The sudden influx of light startled her and she forced her eyes closed. She was about to ask Kelly for assistance when the sharp report of a rifle firing filled the docking bay. Halsey's disorientation was not helped when she failed to cover her ears against the loud noise. Once more she began to ask Kelly for help but was suddenly pulled along as the Spartan ceased firing and started to drag her across the docking bay.

With her vision returning Halsey could see that they were heading for an exit. Straining her head around she caught sight of the small Flood infectious forms crawling over the decayed bodies of the Covenant to swarm towards them.

"This access way should provide the most direct path towards the room in which you are headed for," Atoning Deviant announced grandly as it floated into the exit the moment Halsey and Kelly did the same.

"Can you shut down this door?" Halsey asked quickly, watching the Flood approach at an alarming speed. Wordlessly the monitor drifted to the panel beside the door and sent a small electrical charge directed towards the panel. The door slammed shut, cutting off the Flood.

"The door is sealed," the monitor informed them, as if thinking they had somehow missed what had transpired.

"It won't take long for the Flood to wear down my ammunition Ma'am," Kelly informed Halsey as she cleared her assault rifle and swung it onto her back.

"Blocking them off is at least going to give us a head start," Dr. Halsey said aloud. "For now we should worry about getting to the central lab before the Flood have a chance to catch up."

The Spartan stared at the doctor for a long moment before turning around and beginning to dredge down the narrow corridor.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"-so after speaking with the human military leaders I requested that I be returned Honor Without Mercy, so that I would be able to reach Silone in time to warn the council of the Prophet's treachery and betrayal. The humans granted me permission to do so, on the condition that I bring along the Demon. I had no quarrel with this and allowed

the human soldier passage onto the ship. When we arrived in this system I discovered a small Jiralhanae fleet waiting at the edge of the galaxy. I engaged them and destroyed the fleet. Shortly after doing so the human Construct detected a Slip Space rupture, which belonged to Councilor Pondomee's ship, the Attrition. It would seem the Jiralhanae ships had awaited it's arrival, and intended to destroy it before the Sangheili aboard could deliver their message to this council. The message those aboard carry is much the same that I have brought before this council.

"The Prophet's have deceived us for millennia, leading us about as we searched in vain for the completion of their 'Great Journey'. My Elder's, the truth is that we are now faced with reality. What the Prophet's wished to give us was not salvation, but to push us into slavery. Using our strength we became their personal puppets to do with as they saw fit. The annihilation of the humans, the slavery of the Unggoy, and the forceful indoctrinate of the Lekgolo. All of these acts of heroism and honor that we believed them to be have lost all sense of meaning. We acted on the Prophet's behalf, and became nothing better than murderers, and dishonorable minions.

"My brothers, now is the time for us to act. We can strike back at the Prophet's, and redeem ourselves for the regretful actions of our past!"

The Arbiter ceased his recant of the past month and glanced up warily at the sea of Sangheili in the upper levels of the council chamber. He saw on many of the faces looks of disbelief, outrage, and sadness.

Emotions that I myself experienced as the truth unfolded before my very eyes. Now it is up to the council to decide whether to believe this..._

"That..." Elder Forsun spoke briefly before pausing to collect his thoughts. "That was quite a tale, but there are several things I find myself incapable of seeing any vindication for several of your claims."

"I will answer any question put before me," the Arbiter responded warily.

"It is true that there have been several instances in the Covenant's history where the Prophets and the Sangheili were not on the best of terms, but never before have we ever been given any indication that the Prophets bared us any ill will. What proof can you give this council that the Prophets are indeed behind this slaughter of the Sangheili on High Charity?"

"Before I was plunged into the ancient realm of the Flood leader, the Jiralhanae Chieftain Tartarus himself told me the Prophets had ordered my execution."

"Is it not by your own words that you described the Jiralhanae as blind, for not seeing the truth?" Forsun asked. "It is not a stretch of imagination to believe that the beast would have lied to you."

"Tartarus had no reason to believe I would survive my fall, what point would there have been to speak an untruth I had no reason to

believe at that time?" the Arbiter countered.

"You have shown this council no real decisive proof that the Prophets are behind this betrayal," Forsun continued, undaunted. "What reason do we have to believe you?"

It was then the Arbiter realized that Forsun was determined to undermine his position. The creature was so intent on the rivalry of their youth that he would put the safety of the Sangheili below such a petty reason.

And he will get away with it too, unless I can appeal to the other councilors. Surely they are all not so blind as to ignore the truth that I am putting before them.

"My brothers, please you must hear the truth, no matter how much it may pain you to do so. I myself felt burn of agony that the Prophet's betrayal has bestowed upon me. I cannot ever forgive the injustice we have been given, and now is not the time for petty fighting amongst ourselves. We stand upon the very cusp of our destiny as a race. Band together with the humans and we may wipe the Covenant from the face of the universe, and give the Sangheili back the honor we lost so long ago..."

"This council will not hear the ramblings of a heretic! A traitor!" Elder Forsun bellowed, slamming his fists against the hardened stone that he stood before. His gaze leveled on the Arbiter and he extended a long trembling finger towards him.

"You...you are the Arbiter of the Covenant! Not the Sangheili! Your words carry no sway within this chamber!"

The Arbiter felt his restraint snap and he reached up to remove the helmet from his head, and throw it to the chamber floor. The alloyed metal clanged against the surface and tumbled towards the podium at which Forsun stood. All eyes settled on the helmet, a symbol of the sacred protector.

"I have seen my brothers murdered by our former comrades," the Arbiter's voice was low, but slowly began to build strength. "Watched as they were slaughtered, unaware of the treachery and betrayal they had faced at the hands of the Prophets. I fought against my former allies and stole their lives, avenging my fallen brethren! Their lives are all I care about now!"

"And you," the Arbiter now leveled a glare at Forsun. "You dare tell me I am to be silent, while I listen to your words of cowardice and ignobility? Hiding behind a cloak of invulnerability you cast stones upon we who have given everything for the Sangheili!"

The Arbiter's hands now tore away the chest plate of his suit of arms, letting it fall to his feet and exposing the large scar that adorned his chest.

"I bare this mark because I failed the Covenant. I withstood the shame so that I might once again bring forth honor to my family name. In the wreckage of the first Halo I returned as the Arbiter, and killed another Sangheili, one who knew the truth! That shame weighs greater upon my shoulders than this mark ever could!"

Trembling with ill-concealed rage, the Arbiter stalked towards Forsun, whose eyes grew in alarm.

"Don't think you can stand upon this high mark and cast your contempt upon those that you deem to be beneath you!" the Arbiter shouted. Any desire to keep some form of decorum no longer resided within him. "What sacrifices have you made for our race? I have given my dignity, and my honor. Humans and Sangheili both died at my hands, and for what? For the Prophets lies? Why was this council not directed at finding the truth? We knew the Prophets concealed many truths from us, and yet nothing was done about it! How can you claim to have the Sangheili's interests in mind, when you cannot even guarantee that you haven't been corrupted by the very power you now hold!"

The Arbiter stopped his forward charge just before the stone podium that Elder Forsun stood behind. When he spoke again his voice was somewhat more composed.

"I have spoken with the human leaders, my former enemies, and I agreed to give them my life in exchange for reparations in regards to every malcontent I ever enacted upon their race. Such a small price that I can give them in the hopes of repairing a fraction of the damage I have caused."

Thinly concealed gasps sprang forth from the collected Sangheili inside the chamber, and the Council stared at the downcast Arbiter with a fair degree of surprise.

"They could have had my head at any time, but I asked them to stay my execution only until I had ensured the Covenant would no longer be a threat to my people," the Arbiter said. His head lifted from the ground and he gazed around at the entire Sangheili council. "But now that I see the truth of what my former leaders have become, I no longer wish for my life to be given for the likes of you. Beaten animals, tamed with the power promised to them from the Prophets. Cowards like you belong on the ground, sniveling for the scraps that are thrown to you."

Turning smartly the Arbiter began to march away. Rage and contempt seemed to smolder off of his frame, and for a moment Elder Forsun could only watch the Sangheili. As it became clear the Arbiter truly intended to walk out of the chamber, Forsun's wits returned to him.

"Stay your feet heretic!" the Elder Sangheili shouted angrily. That anger only blossomed as the Arbiter continued, completely ignoring the order. "Do not allow him to leave!"

The Arbiter finally stopped, when he found his path blocked by several guards, their energy blades drawn and poised to strike.

"You would strike me down?" the Arbiter asked as he turned back around to face Elder Forsun.

"The council's word is law!" Forsun shouted. "I will not have a traitorous creature like yourself walk free after disobeying an order."

"I am the traitor?" the Arbiter asked, his eyes burning. "I have done everything for this planet! For the Sangheili that walk amongst each

other in this city of Corinphi, and the other cities built by my ancestors! I've known pain unlike anything you have ever felt!"

The Arbiter then paused, and for a moment the entire chamber held it's collective breath, waiting to see what he did. With a defeated sigh the Arbiter let his hands remove the final pieces of the ceremonial garb he wore. Tossing the sacred armor to the ground, the Sangheili once again turned to Elder Forsun, his body free of any cover.

"I will not serve this council, and I have no desire to hold onto the title of 'Arbiter'. I shall cast it aside as I will your orders and decrees. My own course will be decided by myself. I will reclaim my name; theone given to me by my father and mother."

The naked Sangheili closed his eyes and for a brief moment a ghost of a smile covered his face.

"No longer shall I be your Arbiter. I am Gann Aonlum, the son of Gao Kinlum."

Once more Aonlum turned, and headed for the exit of the chamber. As he passed the stupefied guards, he threw one final comment at Elder Forsun.

"If you wish to have me stopped, do so with your own hands Forsun," he said. "In one days time I will leave this planet and head for Danrun. There I will battle with the Covenant and see to it that my brothers are avenged. All who wish to fight alongside me are welcome, but I will hear no orders from this council."

As he walked out of the council chamber, Aonlum felt the weight lifted briefly from his shoulders. The crushing guilt and rage that had engulfed him since the destruction of the first Halo now seemed to be a different part of him. Perhaps he could finally put those events behind him, and move on unburdened by his memories.

John was quite certain he had never felt so out of place in his entire life. Standing before the large fountain in the middle of the street he could see the many different Sangheili that watched him with a mixture of fear and loathing. The scuffle that had occurred after he debarked from Honor Without Mercy had apparently already made the rounds inside the city. While the Spartan had done his best to ensure that he hadn't actually injured the Sangheili that attacked him, something told him it didn't matter to the others. The guards that had been ordered to escort him were more than likely there for his own protection.

"Makes you wonder if this alliance will ever actually work, huh?" Cortana remarked. John finally turned away from the gathered Sangheili and let his gaze slip down to the water that flowed about the fountain. His gloved hand slipped down and absently traced patterns on the waters surface.

"I think we've got company," Cortana said, alerting John a moment before he sensed a presence moving up behind him. Straightening himself he turned, and was taken aback when he came face to face with

a robe-clad Arbiter.

"Demon, a moment of your time," the Sangheili requested as he motioned away from the gathered crowd. John obliged the Arbiter and followed him as they walked away from the crowd. The guards that had been shadowing the Spartan stayed behind as well.

"You look different," John said, and he was prepared to ask the Sangheili about the lack of armor when he caught the glint in his eye.

"Despite our status in the Covenant, our Elders had decided that we were to keep the old way of life the Sangheili enjoyed before integrating ourselves with the Prophets. These robes are the standard wear for us Sangheili. The armor you see upon my brothers when in battle is deigned necessary by the High Council," the Arbiter replied, then quickly continued. "I have spoken with the Elders, Demon."

John waited for the Arbiter to continue as they moved underneath an archway. Their path had begun to slowly move away from the heavily populated square and lead off into some of the more spacious parts of the city. The archaically designed aspects of the town seemed to be left behind as the two soldiers emerged from the narrow walkway and into a courtyard of sorts.

The lush green scenery was quite a contrast to the city itself, which seemed to be constructed of nothing but clay and stone. Tree's and shrubbery encompassed the entire area, as small stone walkways led beneath the overhanging branches, intertwining with the rest of the paths near the center of the courtyard. There a large array of marble statues stood, adorned with lavish depictions of various Sangheili in many different poses. The Arbiter and John came to a stop before one of the statues. It displayed a large Sangheili garbed in what appeared to be ceremonial armor, not entirely unlike that which the Arbiter had previously worn. Within the grasp of his right hand the Sangheili held a spear that was nearly as long as he was tall. The Sangheili's attention seemed to be drawn to the sky, as if he were looking towards the heavens in contemplation.

"Something tells me the talk didn't go well," John said finally, when it became clear the Arbiter would not say another word.

"That is an adequate summation, Demon," the Arbiter replied, and John could hear the bitter tone in his voice. "The council has deemed me unworthy of addressing them about the Covenant. Even with the evidence presented to them from myself and the other Sangheili, Lekgolo, and Unggoy; they still refuse to believe that the Covenant could betray us."

"The point seems a little moot wouldn't you say?" John asked, then continued when he got a confused look from the Arbiter. "The Covenant aren't going to care whether or not your council thinks they've been betrayed. As soon as we're taken care of on Earth, I'll bet this planet is going to be their next stop. Once that happens whatever arguments they may have had are going to be thrown away."

The Arbiter sighed as he looked up at the statue.

"I do not wish to see this planet destroyed."

"Nobody wants to see that happen to their home," the Master Chief said simply. "But wishful thinking isn't going to do much in stopping it from happening."

"I know that," the Arbiter said more sharply than he intended. "That is the reason we came here, so that I might rally my home world into lashing back whilst the Covenant are in disarray. There isn't much I can do however, when my own people view me as a traitor."

"A traitor?" John asked incredulously. The Arbiter inclined his head lightly to stare at him for a moment before his hands gripped the sash that held his robe closed. With a light tug he loosened the material, exposing his chest and the large scar that adorned it. John stared at it in morbid fascination for a moment, before the Arbiter quickly covered himself back up.

"That is the Mark of Shame," the Arbiter explained. "After the destruction of the first Halo I was branded a heretic for allowing you to escape after the damage you caused. The Prophet hierarchs followed the will of the council and I was tortured at the hands of the Brutes. Before my execution was carried out, the Prophet of Truth and Mercy enlightened me. I could redeem myself by becoming the Arbiter of the Covenant, and following the Prophet's every order."

There was no accusation in his voice, but John felt the faint tinges of guilt inching their way through his conscience.

"Arbiter, I..."

John was cut off when the Arbiter waved his hand dismissively. A look of consternation touched the Sangheili's face as he reached forward and ran a hand along the small plaque that stood in front of the statue.

"You owe me no explanation, Demon. Your actions were for your people, and I could never find fault with that," the Arbiter said. "I have given up the title of Arbiter however, so please refrain from calling me that."

That certainly piqued John's curiosity, but he didn't dare ask for the Sangheili to divulge anymore. Instead he asked what the Spartan should call him instead.

"Gann Aonlum," he replied. "The name given to me by my father and mother, before their deaths."

"Aonlum," John said, and received an appreciative nod in return. "I suppose one good deed deserves another."

Aonlum looked at John with a moment's confusion before realization dawned on him.

"You no longer wish for the title of 'Demon'?" Aonlum asked. "The name has it uses. Your enemies fear you without ever having seen your image."

"True enough," John replied. "I don't have any problems with the Covenant thinking of me as a Demon, but I would rather my allies did

not."

John felt a small sense of satisfaction at the surprised look Aonlum gave him after that admission.

"Very well, what would you have me call you?"

"Master Chief should be fine I think."

Aonlum looked at him with a smirk before turning back to gaze at the statue.

"You're in a good mood today," Cortana's voice said inside his helmet. John spent a moment wondering why he had asked Aonlum to call him Master Chief. While the two had bonded somewhat on the trip from Earth to Silone, there was still a wall between them. Soldiers have a hard time forgetting enemies, especially imbedded ones like the Spartan and the Sangheili had once been.

"Master Chief, what would you do if you were in my place?" Aonlum asked suddenly. His voice was soft enough that John would have missed it had he not been paying attention.

"I don't think I'm really qualified to speculate..."

"Speculate," Aonlum urged intently.

John took a moment to collect his thoughts before venturing forward.

"You said yourself that the council won't listen to you because of your supposed heresy against the Covenant. I think it would be best if you took a step back and let someone else explain the truth to the council," John explained, and seeing the immediate dislike for that plan in Aonlum's eyes, he continued. "This isn't about saving feelings, or trying to make a point of honor. Right now we've got the best chance we'll ever have to wipe the Covenant off the face of existence. If we let personal grudges and hard-headed people deal with this problem, you Elites are going to find out the hard way what it feels like to be in the same boat as humanity."

"You have a point," Aonlum grudgingly admitted. John spotted the defeat in his voice and pounced.

"The other pilot we met after taking out the Brute fleet, 'Eranu-something or other," John said. "He's been sent here in the ship of an Elite councilor from the Covenant home world. That fact alone is going to buy him some credibility with your council. He can argue the side of the Prophet's betrayal; he's seen it himself with his own eyes."

"And what of the Forerunner and the Great Journey?" Aonlum asked lamely.

"Cortana has Guilty Spark under lock and key inside _Honor Without Mercy_," John said. "It seems to take a kind of perverse joy out of explaining the true purpose of the Halo's and the fate the Forerunner's met because of the Flood. Something tells me it'll be all the more enthusiastic about explaining that truth to the council, and if that fails, then to the public."

Aonlum looked troubled for a moment before shaking his head in resignation.

"You make too great of a point for me to ignore Master Chief," Aonlum admitted. "Very well then, when the council reconvenes tomorrow I shall bring before them 'Eranumee and the Oracle."

"It might be wise to get out of the habit of referring to Guilty Spark as an Oracle," John said cautiously. Aonlum looked at the Spartan for a moment before nodding.

"I believe I owe you an apology," the Sangheili said. "When I had first seen you amongst your people I believed you to be nothing more than a weapon, created by your leaders. Now I see the error of that belief. What lies beneath that armor is a mind as independent as the rest of your race."

John wasn't sure what to say in response so he simply changed the subject.

"I think it would be best if I returned to the ship. Regardless of our intentions the other Elites don't seem to like my presence here."

Aonlum shook his head softly and nearly smiled at the Spartan.

"Before we do that there is one other destination I wish to show you."

"And that is?" John asked.

"The Forerunner installation in Akhenaten."

"It would appear that the Flood are breaking off their attacks for now," Atoning Deviant said grandly, surveying the destroyed lab with interest.

Dr. Halsey release a deep sigh as she stepped around the fallen glass tube she had been crouched behind. The Flood were persistent indeed, and she could see that Kelly's ammunition pouch had become far less heavy than when they first arrived inside the installation.

As if reading her thoughts Kelly announced that she was down to her last clip for the MA5B.

"We should be alright for now," Halsey said as she dug in her pockets for the small encrypted data display that had the outlay for the entire facility. "It looks like the room right up ahead is holding what we're looking for."

Without a word the trio entered through the final set of doors and emerged into a large spherical room. Terminals lay scattered around the hanger, with a large open section in the center of the room. Elaborate hieroglyphs decorated the walls in a beautiful pattern. Dr. Halsey found herself drawn to one section, and lightly ran her hand

across the etched markings. A gasp was drawn from her when warmth suddenly exploded throughout her body and a bright light began pulsating from the interior of the walls themselves.

"Is there something wrong Doctor?" Kelly asked as she checked the room for any signs of the Flood. The pair of Elite corpses on the floor had made her wary of the supposed sacred room, as Atoning Deviant had described it.

"No," Halsey responded as steadily as she could manage. With a quick glance back at the spot where her hand had fallen, she turned her attention to the many different terminals.

"I wonder what the real purpose of this facility is." Halsey asked herself aloud.

"This installation was developed to study the dormant habits of the Flood, and to see if a biological agent could be developed that would negate said ability."

A chill passed through Dr. Halsey when she realized that the voice did not belong to Kelly or the monitor, and she spun around sharply, surprise etched across her face as she stared blatantly at the figure situated in the center of the room.

"It is indeed a surprise I find myself facing not only a Reclaimer and a human, but a Series F-342-Class Monitor as well," the figure said. The deep, flowing robes the figure wore obscured its face and other features, which made it hard for Halsey to determine that the figure was indeed a hologram projection.

"Who are you?" Halsey asked. She had already guessed what the creature was, but the question had come out all the same.

"I am that which you have dubbed a Forerunner of course," the figure said before turning to Atoning Deviant. "Have you not explained everything to them? I had thought your protocol warranted a full disclosure to any and all human life forms you came across."

"They disobeyed Protocol's seventeen through thirty-seven, and I was forced to adapt to the changes made in my environment," Atoning Deviant replied, annoyance touching its voice. "I had not anticipated that you would have left a copy behind, knowing full well the dangers present from doing so."

"Sacrifices were made," the Forerunner responded. "We couldn't discern if the final Monitor design would indeed function over the expanse of time we anticipated it would take for these creatures to evolve and eventually discover the Installations. There was no telling what might go wrong with your programming between the time we activated the Installations and when the humans finally caught up. The risk was necessary in my judgment, and it would behoove you not to pass any kind of doubts on that decision."

"You're an A.I.?" Halsey asked hesitantly. The Forerunner turned and in a surprising move, gripped the edges of the hood that covered its face and pulled the material back.

"In the basest of explanations, yes that would be accurate," the Forerunner said. The sloped appearance of its skull seemed to

indicate a falsity in the hologram projection, but as the Forerunner tilted slightly to gaze at Kelly, Halsey saw that the bone structure leading from the base of the neck did indeed indicate an unnatural angle.

_The Forerunner are a separate species entirely, _Halsey speculated to herself. _The angle of it's body frame indicates that while it may indeed be a very powerful creature in terms of strength, the sloped shape of the skull creates a kind of centering for the brain, giving it a compact and large width. Almost half again the size of a normal human brain more than likely. The unnatural tint of the skin as well may indicate some form of adaptation to gases in their birth place that led to this form of evolution within their species. Regardless their appearance is quite attractive, if almost wholly uni-sex._

"It would seem the Reclaimers have indeed been chosen and harvested," the Forerunner said as it gazed at Kelly, incased within the MJOLNIR armor. "As well, a monitor has made contact with a Reclaimer too, speaking volumes of truths that you have visited one of the Halo Installation. I find myself wondering why is it that my records show no indication of the Installations being activated. Would you care to elaborate on this?"

"I..." Halsey found herself at a loss for words as the Forerunner glared at them.

"We spared you humans so that you would carry on the task we left within your ancestors. The sacrifices we made so that you would live were great, and it would pain me greatly to learn that humanity had betrayed us."

Halsey swallowed as she tried to shake away the fear that had gripped her when seeing the unbridled anger within the Forerunner.

"I can assure you, Forerunner, that we have every intention of carrying out your duty that was assigned to us," Halsey said determinedly. "But first you must disclose some information for me."

"The Sanctuary's is it?" the Forerunner asked. Halsey nodded in return.

"Yes, and also I would like to here the real reason the Halo's were activated," Halsey said. "What was it you Forerunner were so afraid of that committing universal genocide was the only solution?"

The Forerunner let a pained look cross it's face before looking away.

"I found documents in the archives on the Halo Installation describing a war," Halsey continued. "I cannot say whether this war was with the Flood, or if it was against something else entirely."

"The war was a product of ignorance," the Forerunner said softly. "If you will listen than I will tell you of our self-destruction."

Sitting stiffly in one of the elaborately designed chairs inside the Forerunner vessel, the Prophet of Truth felt bile rise in the back of his throat as he gazed at the face of the Forerunner that sat before him.

"You say the Prophet of Law did indeed form the Covenant?" the Forerunner asked, still using the ancient tongue

"Yes," Truth nodded. "It was his belief that with the Covenant it would be possible to salvage all of the Forerunner facility's and keep the technology for the Prophets own use."

"So he has deceived all of the other Covenant?" the Forerunner asked, amused.

"As well as many of the other Prophets," Truth acknowledged. "Shortly after he was certain you Forerunner no longer hunted for him he had many of the remaining Prophets murdered, and set out to create a new generation of Prophets to use for his own purpose."

"How do you know this?" the Forerunner questioned. "Law was paranoid in the short time I knew of him. He would not have divulged such secrets unknowingly."

"The Prophets are not everlasting, as you know. The Forerunner created Law in an experiment with the Flood, and as such we age at an incredibly slow state and without the need to feed on other species like the Flood. Without that specific attribute however, the Prophets still age and eventually die out. Law was only able to copy some of the documents the Forerunner used to create him, and as such the Prophets he created himself are mere shells compared to him. He has lived for eons however, and as such his body decayed to the point where he could no longer successfully lead the Covenant. I was chosen as his successor."

The Forerunner stared at Truth for a long moment, and Truth forced himself not to look away. Finally a short laugh was emitted by the Forerunner as it got to it's feet.

"Perhaps he has not told you everything coward," the Forerunner laughed. "For being so forthcoming with that information I will spare you long enough to lead me to the Covenant home world."

"What?" Truth said in surprise. "I am to be spared?"

"I think it will be far more amusing to see your face when the truth is exposed, coward," the Forerunner explained. "The sustenance from your slaves has given me more than enough time to last the journey, but I assure you, since they were not harvested, I will begin to crave again before we arrive. Should you not take me directly to this, Danrun, I will ensure your death to be quite uncomfortable."

"Y-yes," Truth replied shakily. He watched as the Forerunner stalked off, and shuddered as he recalled the Forerunner's appearance. The Prophet of Law had described once, what their creators had looked like, and it had not prepared him for the real thing.

_That is the least of my problems however. Once the Forerunner reaches Danrun, he will seek out the Prophet of Law and exact the

Forerunner's revenge for his
betrayal._

****Author's Notes:** I had many problems with this chapter. There were repeated rewrites and such, and I was forced to do a final rewrite of the last bit almost a few hours before posting this because of a computer error. Needless to say if it is a little convoluted please spare me any harsh criticism. I'll get on Chapter 21 right away, and I swear it will be much more forthcoming in the plot development spectrum. Lots of talking and such.**

****Please keep any wild speculation about the Forerunner to a minimum, I don't want anybody running around and spoiling everything for everyone else.****

22. The End of a War Chapter 21

****Author's Notes:** Like I said, I really wanted to get this chapter rolling, and it appears I was able to do just that. For those wondering about the Sangheili Council on Silone, as well as the thousands of other little things I've been hinting at, this chapter will give you a teasing glimpse once again.**

****Just a few things regarding this chapter.** The Forerunner temple on the Elite home world is indeed the temple Forlume discovered back in the first Covenant History Chapter. There's several references to that chapter in here so if you by chance forgot you can go back and read it.**

****The End of a War****

****Chapter 21****

****Abandoning Home****

The infirmary inside the Lewis Puller had an interesting and askant history. During the uprising on the planet Terra in the early 2400's, the Lewis Puller had been given its first combat sortie shortly after emerging from the testing labs of the Navy on Earth. The Halcyon-class cruiser was one of the first lines of the newly designed carriers to be given an actual combat mission in it's century of military use before being retired in one of the many Navy graveyards for dated ships and other tech.

Shortly before the uprising on Terra, Koslovic and Frieden rebels had boarded and consequentially overwhelmed a fleet of ships destined for the recently colonized planet. The fleet continued onto its original destination, but filled to the brim with revolutionary's.

The rebels were supporters of the Frieden/Koslovic ideology that had been established near the end of the 21st century, and eventually crushed following the Interplanetary War. Displeased with the overpopulation on Earth and the Inner Colonies, the rebels intended to establish their own planet, separate from the UNSC military sphere and the influence they enacted upon the Inner and Outer Colonies.

Once news of the massacres that occurred on the civilian fleet had reached Earth, Admiral of the Navy Brian Paisely ordered the mobilization of the IX Carrier Group, along with the First Marine Division. Communications with the fleet headed for Terra were non-existent, and the intentions of the rebels had been unknown.

The Lewis Puller was one of the many cruisers assigned to the IX Carrier Group, and as legend soon spread throughout the military, it was the first and only Halcyon-class cruiser ever to destroy an entire fleet of carriers without assistance.

Admiral Paisely intended for the UNSC forces to cut off the rebel forces. The ambushed carrier fleet had originally set out from Sigma Octanus IV, and the UNSC fleet would be departing from Earth. Star charts had been quartered and after careful analysis it was determined that the UNSC fleet could reach Terra before the rebels and thereby stop them from landing on the planet and forcing a long and costly deployment of the First Marine Division.

Then Captain of the Lewis Puller, Frank Vandegrift, was a generally unknown Captain inside the UNSC. He would however, be forever instilled into UNSC and Marine Corps legend following his actions defending Terra.

Three weeks spent traversing through Slip Space, emerging only to refuel and service the Carrier Group at subsequent colonized planets, gave Captain Vandegrift a chance to become acquainted with the First Marine Division Commander, Brigadier General Denny "Lew" Pawlson. Both career soldiers, they found a comradeship between each other that allowed them to look past the sometimes-strained relation between the Navy and the Marine Corps.

On a scheduled emersion from Slip Space, the IX Carrier Group Commander, Admiral Fletcher, noticed that the Lewis Puller had not followed the Carrier Group. Believing it to be a simple technical malfunction at the time, Admiral Fletcher did not divert much attention to locating the Halcyon-class cruiser, and proceeded with the refueling of the Carrier Group.

The Lewis Puller had indeed suffered a malfunction, but it was not a simple retrograde movement that caused a delay in the Slipstream. It was in fact the complete opposite.

Inside the Slipstream of Slip Space, it was general knowledge amongst ship masters and crew that certain events in Slip Space often leant to changes in the speed of flight. On some courses, ships could find themselves taking a flight the same length as another ship might take in a different area of the galaxy, but end up taking longer to complete the trip than the other ship. Physicists and other scientists eventually classified this phenomenon as "Slipstream Temporal Flow". Despite the knowledge of these time anomalies, scientists were incapable of discerning a concrete reason as to why there were such great differences in travel between star systems.

In a rare event, the Lewis Puller had actually been subjected to the "Slipstream Temporal Flow", while the rest of the fleet had continued on at the normal pace. As such the Lewis Puller completed the final jump a day ahead of the Carrier Group, and arriving at the exact moment the rebel fleet entered the system as well. Logs pulled from the wreckage of the rebel fleet showed that at an unspecified

time, the rebels had encountered a time anomaly much like the Lewis Puller had. This resulted in the Lewis Puller defending the planet Terra against an entire fleet of stolen UNSC ships.

The events from the battle that was later known as "The Fight for Terra", earned Captain Vandegrift the Navy Cross for valor in combat. In a surprising move the Captain had named General Pawlson on the list of soldiers who performed admirably in battle. While the reason behind this varied depending on the historian one might ask, it was inevitably because of the Marine General's advice to Captain Vandegrift during the battle that had earned the Captain's esteem.

During the debriefing back on Earth, it had been decided that the rebel fleet would have to be annihilated so that they would not be given the chance to land on Terra and hide from the UNSC forces. In concordance with the Navy's wishes, Captain Vandegrift had intended to destroy the fleet. However after taking council with General Pawlson, Vandegrift issued a standing order with the crew that a minimal amount of force would be used to incapacitate the rebel ships.

The battle lasted for nearly a day, and at the end six rebel ships had been rendered inoperable, and the Lewis Puller was seriously damaged. Despite this, Marines were deployed in retrieval crafts to rescue many of the enemy that were on board the disabled ships. Once the retrieval crafts returned to the Lewis Puller, it became evident why minimal force had been necessary. The rebels that had taken over the UNSC ships had never killed any of the original crew or civilians aboard. There had been a bloodless coup, and had the UNSC destroyed the fleet as intended, many civilian lives would have been sacrificed. As it was the Lewis Puller managed to evacuate over five thousand civilian, military, and rebel forces from the damaged ships. Many were suffering from various injuries, and the infirmary soon filled past its capacity. After a short consultation with engineers aboard, the eastern wall of the infirmary was knocked down, and the large crew quarters on the other side converted into an extension of the medical bay.

During the reconstruction of the Lewis Puller, Captain Vandegrift requested that the infirmary remain in the condition it was. His reasoning being that the specific portion of the ship served as a testament to the ideals the UNSC should stand for. At one time enemy, civilian, and military individuals had all been treated inside the infirmary, lending belief in the ideals of the protection of the universe, and a united front for all of humanity.

Over a century later, when the Navy tasked itself with recovering many of the Halcyon-class cruisers from the Naval graveyards, the decision had been made once again to leave the infirmary aboard the Lewis Puller intact, and simply upgrading many of the old technology that still inhabited the cruiser's medical bay.

The grand history of the infirmary was on Sergeant Avery J. Johnson's mind as he stepped into the medical bay, his eyes lingering on the small plaque that detailed the events that led to the alteration to the infirmary aboard the ship. He was returning from Captain Miranda Keyes' quarters, where he had been speaking with the Captain before she was called away to meet with Fleet Admiral Terrence Hood.

What brought Sergeant Johnson's attention to the vast history of the infirmary aboard the Lewis Puller has been his reflection on the situation that Captain Vandegrift and General Pawlson faced when they stood between the rebel fleet and the planet of Terra. The two soldiers had been given the opportunity to show their enemy mercy, a situation the UNSC had lost all sense of contemplating within the last half century.

The Covenant were a tenacious enemy, one that showed the UNSC that they were not the military supremacy that humankind had always thought themselves to be. The nearly inconceivable technologies the Covenant possessed was enough for many to consider relenting to Covenant dominion, so long as it meant that mankind would not be completely annihilated by the alien menace. Unfortunately the Covenant had no intentions of accepting any form of surrender by the humans.

If Captain Vandegrift had been standing between a human planet, but facing a Covenant armada, would he have been as forgiving and merciful? Did the Covenant truly deserve any form of mercy no matter what the situation?

Grumbling to himself, Johnson walked down the center of the infirmary, his eyes carefully avoiding the many different bunks filled with bodies no longer animated with signs of life. There was a flurry of activity near the end of the infirmary, and as he grew closer Johnson saw that a soldier was convulsing violently on one of the many medical bunks.

Surgeons hovered around the soldier, trying to keep his body still with little success.

Johnson was rushing down the corridor and pushing two of the surgeons out of the way before he realized what he was doing. He wrapped his lone arm around the soldier's chest. The short respite from the soldier's convulsions allowed one of the nurse's to plunge a syringe into the patient's arm. A few cautious moments passed until the convulsions finally stilled and the soldier slumped into the bunk, his eyes glazed over. Johnson slowly lifted himself off the soldier, and felt a hand fall upon his shoulder. Turning he saw one of the surgeons he had knocked over smile lightly at him.

"Thanks Sarge, I wasn't sure what we'd have done if that boy wouldn't have stopped convulsing," the surgeon said.

'Boy' huh? Johnson thought bitterly. That 'boy' was willing to give his life for his planet, for Christ sakes! He deserves to be called a man.

The surgeon's attention seemed to be drawn to Johnson's fatigues. "If you have the time sergeant I'd have to recommend you change into something fresh."

Johnson could feel the thickness of his jacket sag against his body and realized what the surgeon was talking about. His fatigues had been liberally coated with blood and muscle tissue. He couldn't tell whether it was his own blood or that of the wounded soldier lying in the bunk behind him. Sparing a moment to look at the unconscious soldier, Johnson turned and walked away from the assembled corpsmen.

Each step he took was punctuated as the blood-soaked flak jacket grinded against his skin painfully, the half-dried blood sticking to his body. Grunting audibly he shifted uncomfortably and continued towards his original destination.

Halfway down the infirmary the Sergeant came to a stop before one of the many medical bunks. The patient on the bed looked up momentarily at him before dropping her gaze back to the olive drab-colored walls. Johnson's eyes settled on the bandages applied to the girl's forearms and after a moments hesitation he sat down on the bunk next to her.

"How are your arms?"

Jan failed to stir at his question, so he inquired again, louder. With an irritated sigh she turned over and looked balefully at the Sergeant.

"The medic said I nearly shattered both my radius and ulna in each arm when one of the Spartan's attacked me," her voice was soft, weak. "He wanted to wrap my arms in casts but I told him not to."

"Why the hell would you do that?" Johnson asked. Jan looked uncertain for a moment before gazing remorsefully at Johnson, tears brimming in her lifeless eyes.

"I want to know how they felt when the Flood took over their bodies. To learn every last bit of pain they must have suffered while they changed into those things, and finally that last bit of torment when I killed them. Enduring this," Jan motioned to her lightly bandaged arms, "lets me learn a little about their pain, and also gives me some form of retribution for what I did." "You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened Jan," Johnson said uncomfortably.

Jan scoffed bitterly.

"Who's to blame then Sergeant?" she asked sadly. "I was the one that pulled the trigger wasn't I?"

"And if you hadn't any one of the other soldiers in that hospital would have," Johnson shot back. "You didn't kill the Spartan's Jan, the Flood did, and you freed them from whatever torture they would have gone through under the Flood possession. Once you become one of those freaks, there's no turning back."

A throb of pain seemed to emanate from the area where his right arm used to be as he spoke.

"The Master Chief isn't going to care that you killed those Spartans," Johnson said. "But he is gonna be pissed when he finds out you've been crying like a little girl. Once he gets back here he'll personally kick your pretty little ass from Earth to wherever the hell this universe stops."

The lighthearted tone to his comments almost drew a smile from Jan when several medical orderlies approached them.

"Sergeant Johnson?" one of them asked. Johnson nodded warily at the two.

"Something up?"

"Come with us please Sergeant," the orderly said. "Captain Keyes' orders."

Belatedly Johnson got to his feet and started to follow the orderlies before turning back and shooting an intense look at Jan.

"I'll be back in a bit girl, and when I do I had better see those arms in casts."

Jan stared back at him without emotion as he walked away, but he could tell she was still considering his words as he followed the two orderlies out of infirmary. Captain Keyes was waiting outside, a troubled look on her face, which seemed slowly to melt as she spotted Johnson.

"Thank you," she said absently to the orderlies, who quickly marched back into the infirmary.

"I just had a very interesting conversation with Admiral Hood."

"Ma'am?"

"Would you believe Sergeant, that I have been ordered to abandon Earth, and the rest of humanity?"

Johnson stared at Keyes for a long moment before he saw that she was perfectly serious. With a cheerless smile Miranda continued.

"During the communications breakdown that resulted from Ackerson's Slip Space jump, the Flood managed to surprise several hundreds of thousands of troops stationed in South America. It was only an hour before the entire encampment of soldiers were wiped out by the Flood, and turned into another legion of Flood forms. This event was repeated in several different countries, and now preliminary estimates have the Flood outnumbering our ground forces by over a million troops.

"We are going to lose Earth," Keyes exclaimed softly.

"Ma'am," Johnson began, shaken but determined. "With all due respect Earth won't fall, not until the very last Marine goes down."

Another humorless smile graced Keyes face as she lightly shook her head.

"ONI and the UNSC are going to be carrying out several evacuation procedures that were originally intended to be carried out when it looked like the Covenant were going to completely break through the Orbital Defense Grid. No matter how hard the Marines may fight, Earth will be abandoned nonetheless."

Bullshit! Johnson thought angrily, though chose not to voice that opinion.

"We've been ordered to follow the evacuation fleet then?" Johnson asked. His eyebrows rose in surprise when Keyes shook her head in the

negative.

"Admiral Hood has informed me that in all likelihood, no matter where humanity may run, the Flood or the Covenant will find us eventually. When they do, that'll be it. There won't be anything we can do to stop them from following the evacuation force. Leaving any manner of force behind is just asking those soldiers to sacrifice their lives."

"Why not just nuke the planet then?" Johnson remarked morosely.

"It was considered at one point," Keyes admitted, much to Johnson's surprise. "ONI had decided that the best way to ensure the Covenant could not follow the evacuation force would be to activate several ten megaton thermonuclear weapons, effectively destroying the planet and the majority of any forces within the vicinity of the detonation."

Johnson's mind reeled at the implication of Keyes' statement.

"When did ONI manage to develop that size of a weapon?" Johnson asked shakily.

"Very recently actually. Apparently some of the data Cortana retrieved from the Halo Installation gave some of the scientists at ONI ideas on how to convert and manage the instability of the nuclear weapons whenever they grew too large."

"They decided not to use the nukes though?"

"Yes," Keyes nodded. "It was apparently decided that destroying Earth would be too large a blow to the moral of the armed forces along with the civilians. I was made to understand the vote came down to six to four in favor of not using the nukes."

Johnson was still attempting to frame a reply when Keyes went on.

"Regardless of what ONI and the UNSC decided to do, it won't affect us much. Admiral Hood has explained that the Lewis Puller, along with all personnel aboard will be tasked with tracking down the fugitive Colonel Ackerson."

A frown creased Sergeant Johnson's face.

"What's the point of that?" Johnson asked. "The bastard isn't going to go anywhere special. It won't be easy to track him either. Any kind of trace we might have put on him will have been lost by now."

"That's a very good point Sergeant," Keyes said with a conspiratorial nod.

"We're not going after him then," Johnson said, realization dawning on him suddenly. Keyes nodded once more and held up a small data crystal.

"Admiral Hood has given us the unofficial order to follow the Master Chief and Cortana, and to assist in any way we can to eliminate the

Covenant. We are to set out for the Elite home world just as soon as I enter the coordinates into the navigational computers."

A myriad of emotions seemed to run through Johnson's mind as Keyes explained the true nature of their orders. On the one hand they would be given the chance to strike at the Covenant and be involved in the outcome of a war that seemed to carry the weight of the universe. Abandoning the rest of Earth however, along with his fellow Marines felt like running away in the middle of a fight, and was truthfully just that.

Staying here and fighting would just be delaying the inevitable, as Captain Keyes has just pointed out to me with tactfulness that her old man had in spades. If we haul ass to go help the Chief and the Arbiter, we'll have the chance to make a difference in the war, and maybe keep humanity alive just that much longer.

Johnson was saved from further internal deliberation when Captain Miranda Keyes set one of her small hands on his broad shoulder.

"We'll be back in combat before you know it Sergeant, and I'm going to need you back at one hundred percent as soon as possible."

"That might be a problem Ma'am," Johnson remarked, indicating the loose material of his fatigues, where his arm should have been. Keyes smiled gently at him in reply.

"I've had the surgeons prep a room for you Sergeant. I understand there's something they might be able to give you to help with that problem."

Keyes motioned for Johnson to follow her as she entered the infirmary, and waved one of the many medical corpsmen over to them.

"Has Corporal Friedson prepped the room?" she asked the corpsman.

"Yes Ma'am," she replied. Keyes turned back to Johnson and smiled one last time at him.

"Follow her Sergeant, and when your out of surgery I'll come see you," Keyes said, nodding briefly before walking back out of the infirmary. The corpsman smiled at Johnson and walked into the small adjacent room to the infirmary. Johnson hesitated a moment before following her. A pair of surgeons decked out in medical scrubs were waiting for him.

"Lie on the bunk please," one of the surgeons instructed him, and Johnson complied. The corpsman from earlier quickly attached a small breathing mask to his face, and Johnson felt his consciousness begin to slip away immediately.

This might be the last time I ever see Earth. I don't want my last memory to be nothing but sitting inside a goddamn infirmary.

Johnson tried to climb back up and apologize to the medical technicians, saying that he had to see Earth one last time. His body

wouldn't comply though, and he could only weakly raise his arm before it too fell immobile beside his body. He felt one of the surgeons begin to cut away his blood-soaked fatigues, just before his eyes finally closed.

The Sangheili city Akhenaten was an ancient temple used both to honor their ancestors, but also to worship the Forerunner. Once a year it was mandated that every Sangheili would migrate to the city, and worship before the large Forerunner temple located beneath the catacombs of the Council Chamber. Old and young alike made the trip, eager to see the structure that had been their very first indication of the true purpose of the Sangheili and their fate.

In the Sangheili year 439, the Forerunner temple was discovered amidst a battle between the Prophets and the Sangheili, who at the time had been waging a fierce war against one another. The discovery had been marked by a declaration of peace between the two warring factions, as the Sangheili had been made aware of the Forerunner presence within the universe, and the malevolence that would result should the war continue.

Upon the creation of the Covenant, High Councilor Fendo decreed that all Sangheili would make a pilgrimage to the Forerunner temple once a year, marking the anniversary of its discovery. Old and young alike were not excused from this order.

There had been much destruction within the sacred city of Akhenaten, where the temple was discovered, and the Sangheili quickly began to clear the rubble away from the area. With assistance from the Prophets, gravity lift platforms were placed before the great entrance to the temple, allowing the Sangheili to traverse the hundred-foot drop beneath the ground without succumbing to serious injury. Those wishing to offer their prayers before the temple itself stood upon the small underground shoreline of where the juxtaposing structure stood. Entrance into the temple was strictly forbidden, though true reason behind that order had been hidden from the general public.

After the initial discovery of the temple, the Sangheili that had entered the temple could not explain the sudden inability to reenter the structure. The Prophets explained the phenomenon away, saying the device needed had been lost at some point and despite a lengthy search, it had not been found.

A lone Sangheili knew the truth of the order, and he had also been the only living creature to step foot into the temple in thousands of years.

It has been many years since I last saw this temple, Aonlum thought to himself as the gravity platform hummed beneath his feet as it carried the two soldiers downward through the ground.

After his graduation from the Academy for Officer Candidates, Aonlum had made his yearly pilgrimage to Akhenaten, a feat he had partaken in since his birth. That particular year he had felt melancholic, and visited his family home that still stood inside the small remote village of Horen. There he looked through his father's possessions. It had been Aonlum's intention to take something that had belonged to

his father and make an offering at the Forerunner temple.

Inside his father's study, Aonlum had discovered a small orb-like device that radiated with dull warmth. At first he was loath to consider parting with something his father had obviously taken great care to preserve, but after a short internal deliberation he decided that giving something of importance would be more meaningful in the end.

The Sangheili had never taken to posting a guard detail at the Forerunner temple, believing it to be an encumbrance upon the true intent the Forerunner temple imparted. Aonlum had chosen a time where he would be certain of his solitude whilst traversing the distance to the sacred temple, and he had chosen wisely. Aside from an elderly couple returning from their personal pilgrimage, Aonlum had seen no other Sangheili as he stepped upon the small beach crest that led to the temple.

Stopping before the structure Aonlum had knelt in the prescribed manner, and prepared to offer his prayer when he felt the orb hidden inside his robes suddenly burn against his skin. He had removed the device hastily and been amazed when he saw the ancient writings on the orb seemingly lifted by some unknown force. Without any clear understanding he had compressed each sigil, and watched in amazement as the Forerunner structure seemed to come alive. The grand door of the temple parted way, and light spilt forth from the interior, soaking Aonlum with a brilliant glow.

That memory was fresh in Aonlum's mind as the Master Chief stepped free of the gravity platform and onto the rough beachhead, only a short distance away from the temple.

"So the Forerunner were doing something on this planet as well," the Master Chief stated tonelessly. Whatever awe the human may have displayed was not present in his voice.

"Yes, for a great many years my ancestors believed it simply to be a religious temple set to show us towards the path of the Great Journey. Now as you may imagine, that belief is not so present within my mind."

The Master Chief nodded as he started walking up the embankment that led directly to the temple. Aonlum followed shortly behind, the small orb within his robes already burned with heat as he approached.

"You may wish to cover your eyes, Master Chief," Aonlum warned as he pulled the orb free, clenching his own eyes closed as the device suddenly emitted a blinding flash of light. Spots swam in spite of the precautionary methods he had taken, and it took a moment for them to clear.

The same symbols from the last time he held the device before the temple were present, lifted from the orb by some unknown energy. The confining urge to press the symbols arose within him, and he compressed the sigils in the same order as he had so many years ago.

"That's an interesting device," the Master Chief commented as the Forerunner structure became animated, its door sliding away to grant the two warriors access.

"It belonged to my father," Aonlum said. "If I am to believe the words of his documents that were left behind then it would seem he inherited it from his father who in turn received it from his father, and so on and so forth, all the way back until the war between the Sangheili and the Prophets came to a close."

The Master Chief grunted in response as they passed through the threshold and took a moment to survey the entrance hallway before continuing on their way.

Deeper and deeper they went; into the Forerunner temple that had been built for a very specific reason so many years ago.

'Eranumee could feel his pulse quicken as he stood in the same council chamber that the Arbiter had occupied only a short few hours before. Obviously whatever had gone on between the sacred warrior and the Elders had not been pleasant, as he had already spotted the gathered armor the Arbiter wore seated before the council.

"Tell me, young one," Elder Forsun urged as he placed his withered palms upon the stone podium he stood behind. "You say you have been sent here on behalf of Elder Pondomee to instruct this council of a war raging on Danrun this very moment?"

Conscious of the many eyes upon him, 'Eranumee cleared his throat before responding.

"Yes my lord, that is why I am here."

"And would you say, 'Eranumee, that the situation on Danrun is of grave importance?"

"Yes my lord."

"Elaborate please."

"I was running a maintenance procedure on my ship when the battle-net suddenly erupted with a flurry of activity. A transmission from the Prophet of Truth was sent to every soldier on the planet, bearing the message that the Sangheili, Unggoy, and Lekgolo were traitors to the Covenant. The Prophet continued his speech, calling for the immediate extermination of all traitor forces upon the planet.

"It would seem the Jiralhanae, Kig-yar, and Yanme'e forces had anticipated this announcement, as it was only a few minutes before I began to receive hundreds of requests for assistance, all around the planet. Before I could determine my course of action, High Councilor Pondomee sent a transmission to all forces not subjugated by the Covenant."

'Eranumee quickly retrieved the recording device from his armor. It had started its life as a part of his Seraph fighter, intended to be used to record the going-on's inside of his cockpit. When he had ejected from his craft, 'Eranumee had thought ahead and removed the device, intending to carry it with him as a memento from his ship. Blind luck would have it that the device had also captured the

transmission by High Councilor Pondomee.

Activating the device, 'Eranumee held it aloft so that the transmission could be heard by all.

"My brothers, we have spent countless ages devoted to the cause the Prophets laid before us. Our faith was matched only by our delusion. I urge you, my brethren, fight! We are the Sangheili. Scorned and betrayed, we will become the Prophets nightmare. The Gods themselves will tremble before our fury, and we will split this world in two. Carry your faith proud, for we are the Sangheili, and no longer will we be the vanguard of the Covenant."

"Our brothers, the Unggoy and the Lekgolo have joined our cause. They are free of the Prophet's will, and together we will fight. They are forever our brothers, and in death they will ascend greatness. We are the Sangheili, and we will fight till the last Prophet falls."

"The Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar, and the Yanme'e have chosen to serve the Prophets, and that decision will be their demise. Do not let mercy stay your hand. They are our enemy. Our forces are rallying in the eastern sector of the planet. From Forunpo, to Gestahl, we have fortified our defenses. The mighty fleet is preparing to lash out against the Jiralhanae ships, and to stop their cowardice. For those of our omnipotent forces that are located inside our enemy's controlled sectors, you must join with our main force."

As the recording ended 'Eranumee could see the looks of surprise, perhaps even outrage that laced across the faces of many Sangheili that were situated within the chamber. He felt a fair share of outrage himself, as the recording brought with it many of the memories he had since burrowed. The sights of the Sangheili corpses, stacked in crude piles as the Jiralhanae set fire to the bodies.

With a painful grimace he pushed those memories away and turned his attention back to the council.

"After hearing this I was unfortunately ambushed by a squadron of fighters under Jiralhanae control. I was shot down but managed to make my way to Forunpo; there I met with a Major who brought me before Councilor Pondomee. I assured him my wounds were not threatening, and he tasked me with fleeing the planet and alerting this council to the Covenant's treachery.

"He requests immediate aid as soon as possible. The Covenant have control over the Forerunner ships and it is only a matter of time before our fleets are destroyed and they begin to assault our ground positions. I urge you, Elders, time is of the essence."

'Eranumee watched as Elder Forsun slowly turned and walked back to where the other councilors sat. Deliberation had started throughout the chamber, as the Sangheili began to digest just what exactly 'Eranumee had informed them.

Elder Gordenee stood from his seat and motioned for the crowd to be silent. Slowly he walked to the podium that Forsun had once occupied and gazed intently down at 'Eranumee.

"Are you aware, 'Eranumee, that the Sangheili who wore the armor of

the Arbiter has told us that not only have the Prophets betrayed us, but that the Great Journey itself is a lie?"

'Eranumee was very much aware that his heart had nearly stopped beating.

The Great Journey? A fabrication? This cannot be!

"That both your own and the Arbiter's stories have matched up is too much of a coincidence for us to ignore," Elder Gordenee continued as his aged eyes swept through the council chamber. "As I now see it there is little we can do but put our faith in Pondomee's words and begin preparations to assist our brothers on Danrun. The general order will go out immediately. All Sangheili forces must be prepared to go into battle by tomorrow morning."

'Eranumee felt a weight lift from his shoulders. After the Arbiter had failed to convince the Elders of the Prophet's treachery, he had not given himself much of a chance to do otherwise.

"In regards to the truth of the Great Journey, 'Eranumee, I ask that you speak with the Holy Oracle aboard the Arbiter's ship. If you can learn any truths than I request you seek me out and inform me of anything you learn."

"I am at your command," 'Eranumee said mechanically, his mind still churning over his disbelief.

If the Great Journey is indeed a lie, than the Prophets will pay tenfold for what they have put us through!

The seed has been destroyed, but not before truth emerges.

What I once lost now comes to me, the true origin of my being.

The universe will soon be lost forever.

From the darkest of shadows, light once more rises from the ashes.

My fate is tied to this light that will not extinguish. Forever I am trapped.

There is no hope for what I have become.

_An ancient evilâ€¦a prophecy of unending death and destruction.

_

It has returned from a destiny of which I had presumed to be concluded.

Shadow will again consume the universe, leaving nothing behind.

What role I will play has yet to be decided, and nothing can be done.

Atonement may be within my grasp, but will I be given the chance?

Questions without answers, and only the progression of time answers my voice.

The tides are turning, but in whose favor?

Cortana could hardly contain her curiosity as the Master Chief and Aonlum stepped through another set of ancient, sliding doors. The vast chamber that opened up to them was both familiar and foreign to her at the same time. It must have been styled after the control room of the Halo Installations, or perhaps the other way around. The grandiose design was not so telling within this facility, but the hint of power and unspeakable horrors seemed to be present nonetheless.

Aonlum gathered her attention as he stepped forward to a small set of controls situated in the center of the chamber. The suspended walkway did not turn into an oval design like the Halo control room, but instead blossomed outward in a single path to the center of the chamber.

"It has been many years since I last stepped inside this room," Aonlum informed them, his voice soft. "Fearing what may happen if I were caught I fled before I could observe it more carefully."

The Master Chief brought them closer to Aonlum as they looked at the console situated before them. Cortana recognized it as the same type of layout that many of the Halo Installations possessed.

"How about it Cortana," the Master Chief suddenly said, "You feel like taking a dive?"

"You didn't even need to ask," Cortana replied with a smile in her voice. The Master Chief grunted as he placed his palm over the console, and Cortana felt herself ripped out of the Mjolnir armor and into the terminal.

A flurry of probes suddenly latched upon his digital frame, but she brushed them aside as a wealth of information, files, video documents, and other forms of data streamed into her cortex. The real reason the Forerunner built this facility suddenly opened up before her eyes, and Cortana could feel her processors halt in their tracks.

"Master Chief," Cortana said, reasonably sure the Spartan could hear her. She received her answer when John responded.

"Take that orb from the Arbiter, and place it into the console."

The two soldiers traded looks with one another before Aonlum handed the Master Chief the orb. Cortana could see he was taken aback by the sudden warmth generated from the device, before he placed it into the console.

Much like the Index disappeared within the terminals in the control room of Halo, so did the orb disappear into the console Cortana was currently inhabiting. She felt the orb pass by her in the digital plane and quickly reached out to catch the device. Her mind studied the intricate designs before pressing each of the sigils on the orb in the same manner that Aonlum had when first opening up the Forerunner facility.

A sudden implosion of energy nearly shocked Cortana enough for her to drop the orb. The security measures she had thrown up as a precaution were the only things that saved her from being pulled into the concentration of energy billowing beneath the chamber.

"Pull me out!" Cortana shouted, and a second later she was back inside the Master Chief's suit, and not a moment too soon, as the chamber began trembling.

"What the hell did you do?" the Master Chief asked as his hands sought some form of purchase on the console he had just pulled Cortana from. Next to him Aonlum was doing much the same.

"I activated the facility," Cortana said simply, though her mind was starting to wonder if she may have misinterpreted the true intentions of the Forerunner. Whatever else she might have speculated on was immediately put on hold as a brilliant flare of lucent energy seemed to rush through the chamber. The chamber shook with greater force as the light intensified, sending both the Master Chief and Aonlum to the hardened floor.

For several, terrifying moments it seemed as if the rumbling would never cease, and then, as if some force had flicked the off switch, the chamber returned to normal.

As the Master Chief and Aonlum pulled themselves up from the floor, Cortana looked about the chamber absently.

"Umâ€|oops?"

Kelly had spent most of her natural life taking orders from others. It was a Pavlovian condition that most career soldiers could relate with. When she received an order from a higher-ranking officer, she did it without question. While this did mean she carried the order out to the best of her ability, it did not mean she wouldn't question the order in her mind.

When she had awoken in the small medical bay inside the Chiroptera ship over a month ago, she had not questioned Dr. Halsey when she informed Kelly that they would not be returning to Earth. Her thoughts however, continued to stew over the orders for nearly a week, before they finally arrived at their first destination.

She had been surprised to see a human colony so far out of the circle of Inner Colonies remaining, and when she asked Dr. Halsey about it, the doctor informed her that the colony was a military facility, and it was Kelly's job to break into it, and retrieve what they needed. Dr. Halsey had not given her any instructions on what to do if she were detected by the enemy, and to Kelly that meant it was her

discretion.

The military facility had appeared to be nearly abandoned when she got her first good look at the place. What she found inside however, showed her that at one point and time there had been a great many individuals operating inside the facility.

Kelly had not been present when the Master Chief had the first human encounter with the Flood, but from the files shown to them by Cortana during their escape from Reach, she knew exactly what the creatures looked like. This helped her identify what many of the laboratories inside the facility housed. She was confused at first; Dr. Halsey hadn't said anything about the Flood being present in the facility, but when she contacted Halsey over their com link she received the news that the facility had been constructed on the orders of one Colonel James Ackerson UNSCR.

Dr. Halsey proceeded to inform Kelly of Colonel Ackerson's SPARTAN III project, and how the Colonel had apparently some new development in store that would ensure the projects success. The tubes full of Flood spores and other base forms seemed to give an indication of just what that development might be.

Through her many years of combat, Kelly had seen hundreds of different stomach-churning events unfold before her eyes, but even she felt slightly nauseated when she entered what appeared to be some form of prisoner detention block. The facility was fed recycled air, and as such the decay on the bodies wasn't too noticeable, despite the fact that it looked like the bodies had been inside for almost a month.

There were literally hundreds of them scattered about, and each one seemed to have some form of radiation poisoning. At first Kelly thought they had died of the obvious illness they possessed, but as she drew closer the massive amounts of bloodstains proved her wrong. Someone had stepped into the prisoner bay and opened up with an assault rifle. Care for the individuals within the cells had not been taken into consideration. Some of the bodies had as many as fifty bullet wounds on their torsos, while others had been struck once, and were forced to die a slow death.

Dr. Halsey had tonelessly acknowledged Kelly's report on what she found, though Kelly could tell the doctor was disgusted as well.

A few more hours of searching finally yielded results, as Kelly found what Halsey had sent her to retrieve. The device was some kind of stationary gravity distorter, and what use it might have for Dr. Halsey she couldn't conclude. On her way out of the facility, Kelly spotted a heavily fortified room. Curiosity got the best of her and after several unsuccessful attempts, the door had yielded, granting her access. Inside she found her another surprise.

Seven cryo tubes held the empty shells of Mark VI MJOLNIR armor, much to Kelly's consternation. She radioed Dr. Halsey and informed her of what she found; in turn Halsey asked Kelly what she had in mind.

Each MJOLNIR battle armor suit since the third iteration had been programmed with a small nuclear reactor that could be activated should the integrity of the armor become compromised. The code for

initiating this protocol was the same for all MJOLNIR battle suits, in case the soldier inside the armor was incapacitated and unable to activate the protocol on their own.

With Dr. Halsey's permission Kelly had set the timer for the nuclear reactors to detonate and hurried out of the facility. There was no sense of regret within her over destroying the amazing pieces of technology. Whoever had been in charge of that facility, and the slaughter of the souls unlucky enough to be forced into whatever tests were conducted, had no right to possess the MJOLNIR armor.

The ordeal on their next stop, a Halo installation, was something Kelly was sure would haunt her for the rest of her life. The retrieval of the Monitor, Atoning Deviant, had signaled an end to her battle against the Flood, and brought her and Dr. Halsey across the galaxy to a remote Forerunner installation stationed above one of the many gas giants in the solar system.

Kelly's mind had run over these events as the Forerunner A.I spun his story about the history of the universe.

What the Forerunner said, it seemed impossibly true, but as the recant came to a close she knew it couldn't be anything except the truth.

However, if it is indeed the truth, then the Covenant isn'tâ€|_

"Forerunner, you said the Prophets were created before the Halo Installations were fired. If that is true, then how could they have survived?" Dr. Halsey asked, interrupting Kelly's thoughts.

The Forerunner seemed distant, and had been ever since it began to tell of the Forerunner's history. It was almost as if it was reliving the experiences it detailed for them within it's mind.

"The few loyal to us at that time sent a report detailing the Prophets creation. From what little we could gather it would seem that they are a mixture of a base life form as well as some kind of collaboration with the Flood. As you know the Halo Installations are incapable of destroying the Flood, and because of this the Prophets were able to survive the detonation of our last resort."

"But if the Prophets are interlaced with the Flood in some form, wouldn't they need to consistently feed like the Flood?"

"Not necessarily," the Forerunner responded. The A.I seemed almost to grow before Kelly's eyes as he folded his arms behind his back. Before the Forerunner could answer Halsey's question, a jolt seemed to run through the hologram display, and a look of surprise was etched across the Forerunner's face.

"A Sanctuary has just been activated."

"What?" Kelly asked. As all eyes inside the room turned to her she realized it was the first time she had spoken in hours.

"Sanctuary 'oh three' has just been activated. The signal was transported throughout the network set up amongst every Installation built by my people. It would seem a linkup is possible as

well."

Kelly watched as the Forerunner A.I disappeared for a moment and in its place a video feed appeared.

"Oh my," Dr. Halsey exclaimed as the two figures on the video became clear. "That's John isn't it?"

The sense of relief that flashed through Kelly as she saw that Dr. Halsey was right surprised her with its intensity. The Master Chief was alive.

"Is it possible to communicate with them?" Dr. Halsey asked. The Forerunner was no longer visible but its voice seemed to emanate from all around the room.

"Only a simple transmission. The linkup between our installations is powerful but it has been long since it was last used. This facility is incapable of generating the strength needed to communicate properly."

"We'll need something to get his attention," Dr. Halsey said, looking at Kelly.

"I think I know what might work."

John was still looking around the chamber cautiously when he could feel the same sensation that he had last felt inside Honor Without Mercy. The feeling that something was wrong, and he couldn't place his finger on just what it might be.

"I think you can put me back into the terminal now," Cortana said.

Looking down at the set of controls in front of him, John tried his best to send a deadpan glare at the A.I inside of him.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, especially if you decide to mess around again."

"Don't be silly," Cortana responded, her voice playful.

Sighing to himself John once again placed his palm over the terminal and felt Cortana leave him.

"Do you have any idea what this facility might have been used for?" John asked Aonlum.

"None," the Sangheili shook his head. "Whatever the Constructs actions may have done we can be assured that it appears not to be too serious."

"Let's hope so," John said, a moment before Cortana interjected.

"This is interesting. I'm receiving a transmission."

"From who?"

"That's the interesting part. Judging from the signal strength and point of origin, I'm estimating this transmission must be from another solar system."

"What's the transmission say?" John asked.

"I think you'd better hear it for yourself."

The transmission was a simple six tone beeping message, but the Master Chief felt his pulse quicken as the message played through some unknown speakers. The message told him everything and nothing at the same time.

"_Oly Oly Oxen Free._"

The trip back from the Forerunner temple was spent in silence.

Aonlum had been confused over the Master Chief's reaction to the message that Cortana intercepted. He had thought the Demon to be unshakable in his demeanor, but what he saw in the control room was anything but calm.

I am certain there is more to the message than what I perceive, but how might I go about getting the Master Chief to tell me?

He was still stewing over those thoughts when they neared _Honor Without Mercy_, and spotted the large gathering beneath the gravity lift. As they drew closer, Aonlum could see that the Elders from the High Council were among the many armored Sangheili waiting for them.

_Perhaps Elder Forsun managed to convince the Council that I am a threat, and need to be neutralized. _

The gathering before the gravity lift soon noticed the approaching soldiers. Aonlum watched in shock as the ensemble suddenly dipped down onto their knees and bowed their heads.

"What manner of trickery is this?" Aonlum asked. The Elders rose back to their feet while the others remained prostrate.

"Arbiter, we made a grave error in allowing Elder Forsun to poison us against you," Elder Gordenee said. "What we have heard from Lieutenant 'Eranumee and the Oracle has opened our eyes to the truth. The Prophets need to be stopped."

Aonlum eased himself out of the tense stance he had taken, expecting the Elder's to order his capture at any moment.

"We have ordered an immediate mobilization of all forces on this planet, and sent hails to all fleets operating outside of our jurisdiction at the moment. When light once again fills our land we will depart for Danrun, and we shall give the Covenant a routing they will never forget."

"How many ships will fly at first light?" Aonlum asked.

"A little over five hundred," Gordenee replied. "'Eranumee tells us that the Covenant possess the Forerunner vessels, but with the element of surprise we should manage to catch their fleet off guard and destroy a good portion of it before they can react."

"If we are lucky," Aonlum interjected.

"What the Prophets have done cannot be expressed in words," Elder Gordenee continued, ignoring Aonlum. "The treachery and deceit against the Covenant will never be forgotten."

Turning, Elder Gordenee motioned for something to be passed forward. Several Sangheili stepped from the crowd, something held in their hands. Aonlum recognized what it was instantly.

"We shall need to rally our forces beneath the banner of the Sangheili. I can think of no greater figure, than the Arbiter."

The various pieces of the armor Aonlum had once worn were placed before him.

"Become the Arbiter once more, and lead our forces," Elder Gordenee said, his voice pleading.

"I thought that the High Council needed to be in unanimous consent over the decision to chose an Arbiter," Aonlum pointed out, his eyes never leaving the armor. The Elder, Aonlum recognized as Forsun's brother stepped forward.

"Elder Forsun has been relieved of his station," he stated. "You need not worry over him any longer."

_I wished to be rid of this armor, and the memories it carried. To become the vanguard of the Sangheili is an honor even I can't fathom to reject. How can I lead our forces into battle however? I am no Captain of a ship any longer. The scar upon my chest will never become lighter so long as I masquerade as this figure of legend.

—

How can this choice be made?

Aonlum's eyes finally moved from the armor of the Arbiter over onto the Master Chief.

To accept the burden and weight of an entire race's hope and fate, is no light task. If I assume this role, might I come to understand this human a little more?

"Honored Elder's I, Gann Aonlum, accept this task."

A mighty cheer rose from the assembled Sangheili warriors as the first Sangheili in thousands of years assumed the title, Arbiter of the Sangheili.

The commotion died down soon, and the gathered forces began to return to the city. The Elder's stayed behind a moment to inform Aonlum of the strategy and time of their departure the following morning. Once they departed as well, Aonlum turned to regard the Master

Chief.

"Well, it would seem you were right Master Chief," he said. "By dawn we will make way for Danrun, and we shall destroy the Covenant."

Aonlum watched in confusion as the Master Chief looked away for a long moment.

"I won't be going with you Aonlum. This is where we shall part."

Author's Notes: Not too shabby huh? I got this out somewhat fast, granted it's a tad smaller than the previous few chapters but its no slouch either.

I understand many people are having trouble wrapping their minds around where I'm going with this story, but trust me everything will begin to make some sense after the next chapter. I really didn't want to go the same old contrived route with how the Forerunner and all that is displayed. This might mean alienating some of you, but for the sake of originality I'm willing to accept that risk.

Any guesses on who the character is in the fourth scene?

Thanks to everyone that's read up this far, and a special thanks to those that review. It may not seem like it, but I read them all and take into consideration what everyone says, be it bad or good.

23. The End of a War Chapter 22

****Author's Notes:** I went on a little bit of a binge with this chapter. Originally it was going to be more than triple the length that it is now, but I had trouble outlining how everything would work out, so I scrapped that idea and cut it more or less down the middle.**

****Plus with this new shorter chapter I'll be able to add a little bit more suspense for the next chapter, as well as give you all plenty to wonder about until I can get the next chapter ready.****

****A side note on the use of the terminology last chapter with the nukes. Yes, I was mistaken when I first put it in, but my knowledge on nuclear weapons is small, so I just threw in the one term I knew and figured I'd just fix it when I was doing the edit. Of course per my usual methods, I completely forgot about it. It is reassuring to know though, that you guys are ready and waiting to point out any error I make. Helps keep me on my toes.****

****The End of a War****

****Chapter 22****

****A Hero Lostâ€|?***

The Attrition billowed through the slipstream as it hurtled through space towards it's destination.

"The location of the facility is actually quite close. This ship seems to have been built with a restructured Slip Space drive, so my estimate on our arrival should be in less than twenty hours," Cortana said through the cockpit's internal communications network.

"All right," John replied, his voice sounding tired to his own ears.

"Something the matter?" Cortana asked absently. Without responding John climbed from his seat and started out of the cockpit.

"I think I'll go get some rest in the back," was his reply. He slid the door leading out of the cockpit open, and moved outside, but not before Cortana called back to him.

"Are you sure this is what we should be doing?"

His feet seemed glued to the deck floor, as Cortana's seemingly innocent question slammed through his chest and made his head swim.

Should we be doing this? I was released from duty on Earth because I was ordered by the UNSC to oversee the Arbiter's return to his home planet. Now that this has been accomplished, shouldn't I return to Earth, and prepare for the return of the Covenant?

A disgruntled sound emerged from John's voice, and he continued down the hallway, passing through a side door that led into the crew quarters. An uncomfortable silence filled the room as he stared at the line of bunks.

Truthfully he was quite tired; John couldn't remember the last opportunity he had to get some sleep. The stimulants that his MJOLNIR battle suit continuously injected him with had managed to keep him going for the entirety of the trip to the Elite home world.

Hesitantly the Spartan walked across the deck towards one of the twenty-odd bunks lining the room. Powering down his shields, he fell upon one of the bunks, ignoring the groan of the metal as it was tested beneath his weight. He would have normally removed his armor, but it was an arduous process and he really didn't want to take it off. There was no telling what might be lurking at the end of their jaunt to this other system, and he didn't want to be caught unaware.

The six toned message seemed to be playing constantly in his mind, taunting him with memories, none of them very pleasant. Words came easy to his mind, those that he had wished to tell Cortana, but he never had been very good at opening up to others.

Lindaâ€¦Fredâ€¦Willâ€¦they're going to be lucky if they can survive their injuries. Ifâ€¦if they don't make it, Kelly is all I'll have left. Whatever reason she had by sending that message, then she must need me, and I can't willingly abandon her, not when I've already lost so many of them.

If he slept now, John was certain he'd be plagued by dreams of his

past. His Spartans frequented his dreams often, one of the few moments in these dark days when he could see them. Sometimes he was given a chance to apologize for failing them as their leader. In other dreams they were taken from him too quickly, murdered before his eyes as he stared helplessly.

Sleep was the last thing John wished to do, but sleep he did.

"Our fleet is underway Arbiter," the navigations officer announced from his position located alongside the western wall of the bridge, where the officer was given the chance to observe the many different terminals and controls necessary to operate _Honor Without Mercy_'s prominent display of navigation equipment.

"Understood," Aonlum replied, his voice weary.

Departing our home world, prepared for war, yet never shall we be ready for the horrid truths of the coming battle.

The Covenant possess two of the remaining Forerunner ships, both of which are vastly superior to the hundreds of carriers under my command. Even without those ships we would already be outnumbered by the Covenant ships, if 'Eranumee's observations are correct.

We shall charge headlong into this battle, preparing ourselves for victory, but I cannot see the likelihood of that outcome.

"I wonder how much of this brooding is because of the Demon's departure?" Aonlum mused aloud.

"Arbiter?" one of the crewmen nearby questioned. Aonlum waved his concern aside with a dismissive gesture.

_I had hoped to give the Demon a chance to observe my old self at the helm of a fleet, ordering ships about with a command that I once possessed. Under the guise of the Arbiter however, I feel like a fraud. This armor belongs to one who has not stained himself with innocent blood. _

Iâ€¦I am drowning in it.

John awoke with a start, his eyes snapping open as his body shot forward, his head nearly slamming into the upper portion of the bunk. Almost frantically he took in the surroundings, his breath labored as he slowly calmed down.

A dreamâ€¦it was just a dream.

It hadn't been long before sleep claimed him, and almost immediately the dreams came to him, showing him images of the past he had burrowed deep within his subconscious. The images were scattered and fading already as he settled his feet to the deck, his head bowed beneath the weight of his memories.

He had been nothing more than a child, running across grassy fields

on a hillside he knew was that of his home. Childish indiscretion filled him as he let the grass flow beneath his feet and he laughed as the wind pushed his hair about.

Somewhere a voice called to him. Sweet, melodic, the voice was so beautiful to his ears that he had turned to run towards it without a second thought.

His mother, a woman of whom no other memories remained aside from her profile, and the wondrous smell of the light perfume she used to wear. It was welcoming, loving; something that said he was home, and he would never be alone again.

He ran to her and tears fell down his face as she embraced him, lifting his small body into her arms as if he were weightless, spinning him about as she said his name.

The joy was soon torn away from him, as the grassy hill quickly became disfigured, the wind no longer blowing, and his mother's arms no longer welcoming. Her voice changed and he realized that his mother was no longer there, and in her place stood a being he had never seen before.

It's body was draped in flowing robes covered with ancient writings that were stained with blood. The creature's face was twisted, contorted almost as if something had possessed it. It looked reminiscent of the horror-filled faces of those consumed by the Flood.

"Come with me, Sinner."

The words weren't spoken in any language John had ever heard before, but he understood them nonetheless. A second voice within his mind spoke them in translated form. His child form twisted in the creature's grip, raw fear driving his struggles as he desperately tried to search for his mother's welcoming arms.

The creature's grip loosened and John fell to the now barren ground. His legs began running away from the creature, carrying him anywhere but near the horrifying thing. Before he could run for any great distance, the ground opened up beneath him, and John felt himself begin to fall into the endless void of darkness.

Something grasped onto his wrist, and John looked up, joy once more returning to him as his mother clutched onto his arm. She held onto him with a strength John had never suspected her to possess.

"My child"

The creature from before appeared above them. Without time to warn his mother, the creature slammed it's arm through her back, ripping through the flesh and protruding out her chest.

John screamed as his mother choked, blood streaming from the wound in her chest. With a sickening sound, the creature tore it's arm free, disappearing without a word. Despite the wound in her chest, John's mother continued to cling to his arm, keeping him from falling into the darkness.

"John"

Her voice was no longer as welcoming as before, and John saw that tears now rolled down her face, mixing with the blood dripping from her mouth. He winced as the blood fell to his face, splashing against his cheek.

"Why did you abandon me?"

The tears were more intense as John had stared at his mother in confusion, her voice was pained and she cried. Hearing his mother cry was more painful than anything he could imagine, and he had shaken free of her grasp and fallen into the darkness, the image of his mother's tear and blood-soaked face staying with him as the darkness swarmed around him.

Hands grabbed at him from places he could not see, and they began to pull at him, trying to tear him apart.

As he screamed, the creature once again appeared before him, it's body no longer shroud in robes. Powerful muscle packed against the creature's body, and it stared down at him with condensation.

"Pain and death. Abandonment and sorrow. What can you protect, Sinner? Who can you save?"

That had been the moment he had awoken. It was no wonder he had been so frightened, as the dream had been unlike anything he'd experienced before.

John got to his feet, but not before noticing with surprise that his hands had been gripping the edge of the bunk as he relived his dream. The metal was twisted and crushed.

"I see we're awake now huh?" Cortana's voice filtered down through the cabin.

"How long was I out?" John asked as he collected his bearings.

"The entire trip," Cortana responded, annoyance touching her tone. "I had to talk to myself the whole way."

"Nineteen hours? I don't think I've ever slept that long outside of cryo sleep," John thought with surprise.

"Have you found the point of origin as to where that message came from?" John asked, ignoring Cortana's rebuke.

"Of course," the A.I responded. "If you can make it to the bridge without taking another nap, I can bring us in for a landing run on the station."

Without replying John walked quickly from the room and made his way to the bridge. Cortana was waiting on the small pedestal between the pilot and copilot seats. Her holographic arms were crossed over her chest and she looked at the Master Chief in bemusement.

"If you'll draw your attention to outside the cockpit," Cortana said, indicating out past the pilot seats. John stepped past her and leaned forward, his eyes settling on the looming station in front of their ship.

"Are there any signs of life?" John asked as he returned his attention to Cortana.

"I can't say for sure," Cortana said. "I ran a heat signature check however, and there was a very faint detection inside the eastern docking bay. So either a ship was in there within the past day or so, or I'm reading the Covenant computers wrong."

She leveled him a glare and smirked.

"I don't think I have to tell you which one is more likely."

"Yeah," John responded absently. "Can you bring us into the same docking bay? Will this ship fit?"

"Of course," Cortana replied. "Would you like to have the honors?"

"You do it."

Cortana seemed to pick up on John's sour mood, for she started the Attrition forward without another word.

John watched the looming station grow closer, but all his eyes could see was the face of the woman in his dream, drenched in blood as she clung to his arm.

Mindful of the stares that seemed to follow her as she walked down the large corridor inside the medical bay, Jan hurried along her pace so as not to withstand some of the stares from the crew members.

She came to a stop at the northeast wing of the bay below a long corrugated ladder. Glancing about shortly, she began to ascend upwards.

"What's going on?" Jan asked as she climbed through the upper port hole that granted access to the crew quarters for those recovering from surgery aboard the Lewis Puller. "I thought this was going to be our last stop."

Sergeant Johnson was seated near the port hole on a single mattress cot, flexing his artificial arm with interest.

"Nobody's home," Johnson replied. "Captain Keyes was just in here and she said the bridge crew picked up hundreds of heat signatures, more than likely from a fleet of ships that just tore out of here through Slip Space. Looks like the Elites didn't want to sit around and wait for the Covenant to come get them, and instead they're heading out to take the Covies head-on."

"Do we know where they went?"

Johnson shrugged.

"Maybe, Captain Keyes said the ship A.I ran a simulation based on the way the ships were facing, and the probable coordinates Keyes fed it from that data crystal Admiral Hood gave her, the Elites most likely

took off to the Covenant home world. Danron or some weird shit like that."

"So we're going after them?"

"Not much else we can do is there? I sure as hell don't feel like sitting around and waiting for the fighting to be over."

"Do you think the Master Chief went with them?" Jan asked, her voice quiet. Johnson looked at her in concern for a moment before getting to his feet.

"On your feet, little missy," the UNSC soldier ordered. Jan glanced up at him incomprehensively before he reached down and picked her up off the deck.

"You really want to tell me your arms are fine without casts, then you gotta show me."

"What do you mean?" Jan asked as Johnson started to climb down the porthole.

"Follow me," he said with a vicious grin. "We're going to have some fun."

The sergeant disappeared down the hole, and Jan was left alone. After a long pause she sighed and slowly started to follow after him.

The Attrition set down effortlessly beside the small ship inside the docking bay. Inside the cockpit, Cortana locked the ship down and John slid his hand over the pedestal, slipping Cortana into his MJOLNIR armor. He left the cockpit and made his way to the rear of the ship where the lower plank had extended, giving him an exit from the ship.

John carried with him an M6C handgun, as well as two Plasma Rifles that the Arbiter had given him when they parted ways on Silone. The Elite had said that he expected the Spartan to return the weapons the next time they met, a gesture John had found amusing at the time.

"Is that the same ship?" John asked Cortana as he walked around the Attrition and came to a stop in front of the other ship occupying the docking bay.

"It's the same design as the ship Dr. Halsey and Spartan -087 left in," Cortana responded. "Unless I was inside I won't know for sure."

"Its not important."

From the docking bay floor, John next came a stop by a large collection of shell casings that were littered near a door. Several meters ahead of the shell casings, John's gaze settled on the large blood splatters that were as familiar to him as the empty casings.

"Looks like the Flood are here as well," Cortana said.

"We should probably hurry then," John said as he came back to his feet and moved for the nearby doorway. As he neared, the door slid open before he had a chance to access the panel next to it.

"I guess we're being given access," Cortana stated as John moved into the corridor. As he reached the end, the door opened much in the same manner as the previous one, before he had a chance to access the panel.

This continued for several more corridors and walkways, and John had noticed that the path opening up to them was also coupled with more shell casings and the remains of destroyed Flood infectious forms.

He came to a stop in front of the lone door in the following hallway, and was surprised to see that the door stayed shut as he approached. His hand moved towards the access panel and he had just flipped it open when the door slid open.

The moment the door parted, John came face to face with the muzzle-end of a handgun. His hand that had been heading for the access panel blurred into motion as he slammed the pistol against the door frame, and quickly pushed himself into the room ramming into the person that had stuck the handgun against his face. He was surprised when his momentum was checked before he could knock the figure to the ground, and found himself flipped over and around, skidding across the ground until he slammed into the distant wall of the room.

"You always were big on making grand entrances," Cortana muttered inside his helmet. John prepared a rebuke when a gloved hand was thrust in front of him. He grasped the hand with his own and was pulled to his feet. This time he came face to face with Spartan -087, Kelly.

As Kelly gave him the 'smile' gesture across her helmet, John had the mental image of when they were eight years old and training hand-to-hand combat with CPO Mendez and the other trainers. Kelly and John were paired up together, and Kelly had pulled that same maneuver on him when he tried to bum-rush her into the ground, thinking the girls smaller size would make it easy for him to overpower her.

John returned the gesture and he looked past his fellow Spartan to see the aged woman standing a few feet back.

"Hello John, it's good to see you again," Dr. Catherine Halsey said with a demure smile.

"Ma'am," John replied.

"I suppose you got our message. I apologize for the lack of details, but we had limited means of communicating with you and I was certain Cortana would be with you. She is with you right?"

"Yes Ma'am," Cortana said through John's outboard speakers.

"Good," Halsey said with a smile. "I'd like the two of you to meet Fasul."

Following the direction Halsey indicated, John turned and looked at the shrouded figure in the shadows of the room. With slow steps the figure immersed, and John was taken aback slightly as the creature removed the hood that covered its head.

"Your helmet," the creature said, his voice deep. "Remove your helmet."

John looked over at Dr. Halsey for direction, and as she motioned for him to do so, John released the locks holding the armor in place, and slowly pulled the helmet off.

A wistful look passed over the creature's face, and it looked away for a moment.

"Thank you," Fasul spoke. "I apologize for being unable to embrace you, but I am but a hologram, and as such physical responses are something I've yet to conquer."

"You're a Forerunner," John said, a statement not a question. Fasul turned back to face him the look of slight amusement remaining.

"I suppose you could make that assumption. I am not a Forerunner in true form, and I can only hope I never have to experience the truth that comes with making the transformation. 'Forerunner' is a word that was created by the race my kind fought against. We were the race that developed the Halo Installations, and after we exhausted all other options, we became the race responsible for the eradication of all life in the universe."

"Transformation?" John asked. Fasul nodded almost unnoticeably.

"Yes, be patient Reclaimer, I will tell you everything shortly. First I would ask that you look at the item your friends came to this station to retrieve."

Fasul disappeared before their eyes and reappeared at the other end of the room. He made a sweeping gesture with his hand and a large panel along the length of the wall opened.

"This is the raiment of the First Reclaimer. A class twelve battle suit designed by my race to be used against the Half Breed threat. This armor was never intended to be used by my own people, but instead it was created for our savior. A human by the name of Cyriacus."

John felt captivated by the suit of arms before him. The armor looked smaller than his own MJOLNIR battle armor, but appeared to be immeasurably powerful. It's pure ivory color seemed as if it had never been touched before.

"Judging by the look of the armor you and the other share, I can see that you humans have retained some of the knowledge we imparted upon you," Fasul said. "I imagine that you have undergone extensive gene manipulation as well in order for you to control that armor."

"Yes," Dr. Halsey answered. "We learned soon enough after designing the MJOLNIR armor that average humans, no matter how well trained, would be unable to wear the suit without sustaining life threatening

injuries the moment they tried to move."

"How unfortunate for those that were forced to be used as test subjects," Fasul commented, and John could pick out the distaste that touched his tone.

"The augmentation process was even more trying on the subjects," Dr. Halsey responded, her tone hard.

"Describe it for me," Fasul said. "How exactly did the humans decide to enhance themselves?"

Halsey paused for a moment as she collected herself.

"The process was five-fold, each step ensuring that at least some of the subjects would die. The first step involved carbide ceramic ossification; basically grafting advanced material onto the skeletal structure of the subject, which resulted in having bones that were virtually indestructible.

"The second step was the use of muscular enhancement injections, which consisted of a protein complex that helped reduce lactase recovery time, and increase the tissue density, further hardening the body. Next we administered a catalytic thyroid implant. Using a small platinum pellet filled with a human growth hormone, we were able to boost growth of the skeletal and muscle tissues. Increasing the subjects vision was done so with a occipital capillary reversal. The final step involved super-conducting fabrication of the neural dendrites, and this allowed for a three hundred percent increase in the subject's reflex time. In some cases other attributes were affected as well but it was sporadic throughout implementation."

"Interesting," Fasul mused. "That is an interesting start to the augmentation process."

"Start?" John echoed. The hologram turned and smiled at him without feeling.

"I'm sure with your introduction to the different monitors on the Halo Installations, you'll have learned that the battle suit you currently operate is perhaps one sixth the power designed in the armor that currently lies in front of you. To operate it you would need extensive training and physical augmentation just to simply survive the process of synching with the armor."

"By synching, I refer to the advanced neural interface designed with the Reclaimer armor," Fasul continued. "The armor itself is a conduit for your mind, and superficial thoughts translate into physical action. This allowed for vastly improved speed while fighting, and when the Reclaimers fought with the Half Breeds, they needed every last essence of it."

Dr. Halsey stepped forward and ran a slender hand down the lower leg of the armor.

"I originally intended to have Kelly use this armor," Halsey admitted. "We found documents on the first Halo Installation that alluded to battle armor designed by the Forerunner to combat the Flood. We couldn't locate it, but after we raided a rogue ONI

officer's headquarters, Kelly came across some reports that spoke of a facility located in this star system that might house the armor. The concern this rogue officer had was surpassing the Forerunner security that might have been put in place. Because of this I had Kelly infiltrate one of the Halo Installations and retrieve a monitor."

"And you did so in a most unpleasant manner," the floating monitor said for the first time, surprising John by it's sudden appearance.

"The floating bastard had me running around the entire ring world just to track him down. I figured using a little 'extra' force to get him cooperative was warranted," Kelly's voice came through the interior speaker network of his battle suit. She had spoken to him through the private com linkup set within all MJOLNIR suits. It should have been impossible for anyone aside from the two Spartans and Cortana to hear it, but Fasul surprised them when he turned and smiled lightly at them both.

"I suppose I should have realized the Reclaimer suit wouldn't be compatible without another set of augmentations," Halsey said. "Do you happen to know where we might find a facility capable of administering them?"

"You are in one," Fasul responded. "This was the station in which the First Reclaimer was born."

"Then if you're still willing, Kelly, we can do this now," Dr. Halsey said to the Spartan.

"I'll do it," John said, cutting the other Spartan off, and turning to look at Fasul. "I'd imagine this augmentation process will prove to be as dangerous as the first time?"

"That is correct," Fasul nodded.

"I'm a big girl, Chief, I don't need you holding my hand," Kelly said through the private com.

"I'm not letting you take that risk," John shot back. "I'm the team leader. 'First one in, last one out', and you know that."

"If I may interject?" Fasul said, obviously overhearing the two Spartan's conversation. "The armor here was designed for a male specifically, and as such a female would be incapable of wearing it. I apologize, but this 'Master Chief' is the only one equipped to handle it."

The Forerunner A.I disappeared once more and appeared in the center of the oval room, and with a wave of his hand, the floor opened up and a large medical table appeared.

"Since you have decided to go through with this, I'll have to ask you to remove the suit you are currently wearing," Fasul said.

"Aren't you at least slightly curious as to why Dr. Halsey wants to get one of you into that armor?" Cortana asked him quickly.

"If it makes me a better soldier, then that's reason enough for me,"

John replied. He looked to Dr. Halsey and Kelly, holding his arms aside to show his need for assistance.

"You're too trusting for your own good," Cortana replied, a moment before she slipped free of his suit and into the small data tablet that Dr. Halsey had extended over the Spartan's hand.

"If you would like, John, I will explain to you some of the history that led to the activation of the Halo's," Fasul said. "The preparations are long, and I sense that time is of the essence."

"All right," John replied as Dr. Halsey and Kelly set to work removing the MJOLNIR battle suit.

"There is one thing I've been wondering," Halsey said as she slowly eased some of the locks off of John's chest piece. "When exactly did the Forerunner first exist? Do you have a time frame or something I could use?"

"Time was of little importance to our race," Fasul replied. "We measured by life and death, known merely as the time of when our ancestors were born of this existence. The scientists amongst our race deigned time periods to be existing in concordance with the supposed 'creation' of our people, but this was never accepted by many."

"You said that 'Forerunner' was a term derived from the race that eventually led to the activation of the Halo's," John said as his helmet was lifted away from under the crook of his arm. "What was the real name for your people?"

Fasul hesitated momentarily, a look of indecision upon him.

"Majal," Fasul said, and a smile formed on his lips. "It has been so very long since I last said that name."

"When I say that time was not important, this did not mean we didn't attribute a sense of reverence and honor to the life of the planets we existed upon, nor the life cycle of our own race. Merely we felt that time as a whole could not be measured based upon our race, and to do so is arrogant and trivial. However, creatures of science are not concerned with such things, and that is how the first act of time precedence appeared in our history."

The lower sections of the MJOLNIR armor came away and John stood, naked as Fasul motioned for him to move towards the medical table he stood beside. Once John was in place, lying horizontal along the table, the A.I continued his speech.

"Some thousands of years after our 'creation' according to our scientific community, a fleet of vessels intending to observe a fledgling planet in a distant star system discovered a form of life we had yet to encounter in our many years of existence. It was found in a hollow chasm beneath a tidal embankment, and as such it was when the life form was first given the name, 'Flood'. For shortly after we discovered it, the chasm collapsed and the river above filled the once empty crypt."

"It was theorized at one time," Fasul continued. "That the Flood were

locked away in that chasm by the remnants of the society that once dwelled on the planet we discovered them on. Indeed there were signs of a civilization, but there were no other living creatures aside from the Flood. Whether this civilization fled the planet at one point, perhaps migrating to another world, or even if they were consumed and destroyed by the Flood, we could not know at the time."

Fasul activated a hidden set of commands and the room darkened slightly. John lost sight of Dr. Halsey and Kelly, who had been staring somewhat unabashedly at him as he was prepped for the augmentation process. The table came to life, and John felt himself become strapped to the table.

"A necessity," Fasul said. "The augmentation process can be painful, and your body is powerful enough to do serious harm to itself when the changes begin."

John nodded wordlessly as the table seemed to come to life. A long mechanical arm appeared, a small syringe near the highest point of the limb. His eyes followed it until the syringe stopped, poised a few inches from his neck. Fasul cleared his throat to gather John's attention once more.

"As is tradition when discovering a new life form, the Flood were studied intently, and it was at this time we discovered they were nearly invulnerable to all forms of heat and cold. Even physical damages were of little effect on the small entities. It had a regenerative ability that we had never witnessed before. This discovery would eventually entail the destruction of our society, and spell the doom of the universe."

"Then," John began uncertainly, "the creatures that the Forerunner fought against weren't the Flood, but another race entirely?"

Fasul shook his head remorsefully.

"No, it was not another race. The creatures with whom we fought were our brothers—our sisters—our families."

Another bitter, humorless smile filtered onto Fasul's face. His next words came at the same moment the syringe plunged downward into John's neck, his consciousness almost instantly dimming.

"It was the Forerunner."

Aonlum felt his body beginning to show signs of fatigue as he watched the activity on the bridge. It had been countless hours since they last entered Slip Space, and he had not taken any time to rest, fearing that something may go wrong and he would not be in a position to respond immediately.

"How much longer until we reach our destination?" Aonlum asked the navigation officer, a Sangheili that was operating the station with two Unggoy.

"Not much longer, Arbiter. I will get a definitive answer in a few moments," the Sangheili responded.

"Good," Aonlum said, he raised his voice so that the others on the bridge would hear him. "Open up a visual connection with the other ships, I wish to address our forces before we enter this battle."

"At once, Arbiter!" many of the bridge hands shouted in response.

Addressing the troops before battle, Aonlum mused. _I have done this countless times in the past, but now I just may finally do it for the last time. Will my life be claimed in this battle? Shall the Covenant steal the honor from the humans and send me into the afterlife?_

"The visual connection has been established Arbiter," an officer announced. "You may begin at any time."

Aonlum quickly got to his feet and stared ahead, aware that his stature had very much to do with whatever impact this speech would have on his forces. His hands settled behind his back, and he pursed his mandibles slightly, looking as if he could see the faces of the thousands of soldiers he was now addressing.

"Our enemy is one we fought alongside for eons. They were at one time our brothers, but now they are our most hated foe, creatures with whom we shall devote our existence to destroying.

"This battle we are about to partake in will not be the last fight of this war. No, there will be more bloodshed after this day. We are creatures of habit, and as our enemy still exists, even on the furthest plane of existence, it will be our duty to hunt them down and destroy them. Mercy and thoughtfulness have no place on this battlefield, and should you believe it wrong, take to heart the fact that were your positions reversed, your enemy would give you no quarter.

"For many years I did stand with you all, while we served as the vanguard of the Covenant. Now as I stand here, I am made to be your leader. The one that all eyes will go to in our moment of need. There is apprehension within me, for I know that this task given to me is one that will take all of my power to uphold in the face of a superior army.

"I weep for those of you that will not live through this day. You will have made the ultimate sacrifice for your people, and for honor. We have a great burden upon our shoulders, for we must repent for our crimes of the past, and by eliminating this heathenness army we shall come one step closer to redeeming ourselves.

"Those that perish I ask of you, as you are lying upon the ground, feeling the remnants of your life slip away, please do a service and pray for your loved ones back home, and for your brothers that still battle our enemy. With your death the enemy comes one step closer to our home world. Do not let this follow you into the dark however, know that your passing will be marked by our voices, crying out into this endless void of space. For your sacrifice will give us the courage to meet our foe with unyielding fury. We shall weep for you once this battle is over. We will hang our heads as your families do mourn your passing, but our hearts will be proudâ€¦proud to have

served with a warrior that was willing to trade his life for the safety of his planet.

"I know not what awaits you on the other side, but as you pass through the gates of the dead, I shall ask one more thing of you. Raise your head high, and meet the gaze of whomever you encounter. Let no one denounce your sacrifice, and no matter how much time passes, know that there shall always be one who remembers each and every name of those that died in this battle.

"Now go, my brothers. Go and fight. Fight for the planet we have left, fight for those that we protect. Shake this very universe to its core with our fury, and never let the enemy see you stumble."

The Arbiter kept his pose stoic, even as the transmission faded, signaling that the troops inside the ships could no longer see him.

_My words were full of hope, but what hope is there for us? Perhaps death is all that awaits me on the other side. _

I suppose an incompetent death is all that I deserve.

"Arbiter, we will be exiting Slip Space shortly," the navigator announced. The Arbiter nodded his head and placed his palms upon the terminal in front of him.

"Are our coordinates matched up? I do not wish for our force to be scattered about the galaxy," Aonlum replied.

"Yes sir, everything is synched."

Breathing deeply, Aonlum closed his eyes for a long moment before opening them.

"When I give the word, unleash Hell."

Canderus, leader of the Jiralhanae forces stationed at Danrun (thus making him the superior commander for all Covenant forces after the extradition of the Sangheili), was currently seated upon the officer's chair aboard the _Order and Faith_ (one of the remaining Forerunner ships). He was watching morosely as the Covenant fleet sent wave after wave of plasma cannon shots at the fledgling ships that remained at the far end of the planet above the sectors that housed the remaining Sangheili, Unggoy, and Lekgolo forces.

"This seems a terrible waste of assets, Your Holiness," the Jiralhanae captain spoke. The aged Prophet seated next to him turned his wizened cranium to peer at Canderus beneath the drooping skin of his forehead.

"Nothing but the eradication of the entire heathenness fleet will please the Prophet of Law," the Prophet of Serenity said, his voice rough, sounding much like a quarry of stones tumbling down a mountainside.

"Then why are we engaged in this artillery battle?" Canderus questioned. "We outnumber the enemy nearly twenty fold. Should we utilize the Forerunner vessels we could crush them without worrying of a single death."

"Are you questioning my orders?" the Prophet of Serenity asked, his voice as calm as ever, but Canderus could detect the hidden undertone.

"Certainly not," he replied, his tone bordering on sarcastic.

"Humph," the Prophet said in response. "To even think of using the glorious vessels left to us by the Forerunners would be a slight upon their very being! Those creatures are not worthy of being sent into oblivion by our forefathers creations."

Such idiotic mumblings from a creature with more power than could ever be conceived, Canderus thought to himself as he returned his attention to the battle.

Unlike the majority of his race, Canderus did not feel the Prophets deserved unending fealty that they demanded from all those subjugated by Covenant rule. His personal views were not withstanding in regards to his military career, as he had since a young age gravitated towards a career involving the miracle of space travel. The wondrous ships the Covenant possessed were enough of an incentive for him to bury his snide thoughts and at least keep up the appearance that he considered himself to be subservient to the Covenant regime.

The idea that the Forerunner were anything but an advanced civilization had never occurred to the Jiralhanae as he was integrated into the Covenant society. That the Prophets and Sangheili seemed to believe them to be their Gods, seemed incredulous to Canderus. The more he learnt the more certain he became, and when the discovery of the Parasite became well-known, he knew for sure that the truth was anything but the filth that the Prophets believed.

And now the Sangheili have been cast aside, along with the Lekgolo and Unggoy. Their innumerable years of service, rewarded with the call for their races to be eradicated.

I wonder how long it will take for the Prophets to decide we Jiralhanae will be of no more use to them? Will we be exterminated in this same manner?

"Sir! Ground units report that they have eliminated the majority of the heathen forces in the western sector. Small pockets of resistance are all that remain there," a Jiralhanae informed them.

Canderus opened his mouth to reply but the Prophet of Serenity cut him off.

"Order the ground forces to crush them without pause," the Prophet sneered, smirking to himself.

Canderus risked sending a seething glare at the Prophet before nodding at the Jiralhanae, showing his support for the order.

These are my troops, Prophet, open your mouth to order them around again and I will crush what little matter exists in that skull of yours.

With a grunt of displeasure, Canderus sunk back into his seat. Taking into consideration the Prophet's proposed method of battle, this would prove to be a long war.

The Attrition tore through Slip Space, the ship a serene spec in the infinitude of space. The ship had only recently left the Forerunner station a few hours previously.

Spartan -081 watched listlessly as the Master Chief, Spartan -117, slept on one of the bunks that had been designed for the Covenant Elites. She had been unnaturally silent since they had loaded the Master Chief onto the ship after the augmentation process had finished. The Forerunner A.I, Fasul, had stated that it would be almost a week before the Spartan would even regain consciousness.

After the initial procedure ended, Fasul explained that while the augmentations done to the Spartan's body were greater than what he received previously, his life was at a considerably less risk of giving out during the recovery. The Majal had perfected the augmentation techniques thousands of years ago.

The Master Chief had not been forthcoming in information about the other remaining Spartans, and Kelly was forced to ask Cortana about their status. She was dismayed to hear that they were nearly killed during the Covenant assault on Earth, but the fact that they survived was testament to the invulnerability of the Spartans.

_Invulnerable? _Kelly asked herself. _If that were true, we'd all still be together. Instead of being so far apart._

Pushing off the wall, Kelly closed the small distance between herself and the Master Chief, stopping to adjust the heavy blankets that had placed over him. She was bent over the Spartan at the precise moment the door slid open and Dr. Halsey walked in.

"Still sleeping I see," the aged woman commented as she took a few hesitant steps forward. Kelly straightened up and remained standing as Dr. Halsey took a seat at the bunk beside the Spartans.

With considerable care, Dr. Halsey ran a hand over the somewhat messy hair of the Master Chief. The Spartans didn't often get a chance to visit the military barbers to get their hair adjusted to the proper military length, so it was not surprising to see the Master Chief's hair in such a state.

Kelly watched the doctor as she tended to John like a worried mother. Despite the biological differences, Dr. Halsey had served as a surrogate mother for the Spartans as they grew up. Even to this day, Kelly still found it hard to think of the older woman as a simulated G-7 in the UNSC military ranking structure. Kelly had long since forgotten her own parents, their faces nothing but distant memories buried within the countless battles she'd participated in.

"Do you think he'll forgive me when I tell him of our mission?" Dr. Halsey asked softly.

"The Master Chief is a fine soldier Ma'am, he'll understand," Kelly replied, even though she herself had doubts of their mission's true purpose.

"Yes, he is quite an amazing warrior isn't he. I feel troubled though, knowing that he's spent so much turmoil over the past few months trying to come to grips with what I last said to him," Dr. Halsey explained. "Now we stand poised to repeat the same horrendous act from the past."

"There's a lot we have to do before that though isn't there?" Kelly remarked.

"Yes," Halsey nodded. "Speaking of that, I think our next destination may house what the documents at Ackerson's facility were talking about."

"Perhaps we should move to another room Ma'am, this room isn't secure with Cortana, the Monitor, and that Forerunner aboard," Kelly pointed out. Dr. Halsey nodded stiffly, and with one final stroke through the Master Chief's hair, she stepped to her feet and slowly walked from the room, Kelly close behind.

The door slid shut as the Master Chief lay in a state of unconsciousness inside the infirmary. A flash of light was all that appeared when Fasul suddenly entered the room, appearing in the center of the room, his gaze fixated on the Spartan. He glanced back at the door Dr. Halsey and Kelly had exited out of, and with a sigh the ancient creature moved across the room to stand beside the Master Chief.

"You humans are so amazingly complex, even after such an incredibly long history."

Fasul bent down and stared blatantly at the Master Chief's face.

"I would have never imagined that I would run into a descendant of Cyriacus in such a place," he said with a smile. "That you would bear the look of him as well is certainly surprising."

"I am afraid I owe you an apology, Spartan. There are several items I kept from you and the others aboard. I suppose I am as much a coward as I was when I first met Cyriacus, and his beloved Chrysanthe.

"The genetic manipulations that you received aboard my station are not the simple upgrades to your current physical condition that you possess. Well, they are, but they contain something greaterâ€|something that will alter not just your body but your mind as well."

Fasul moved away from the Master Chief's body and began to slowly pace around the room.

"Cyriacus was not simply the first Reclaimer, he was a brilliant tactician. The Half Breed's possessed incredible wisdom and knowledge, all of which they absorbed whenever they would feed on a Flood-infected individual. This knowledge of there's made it nearly

impossible to stop them from learning of our plans. They knew our battle formations, and any type of weaponry we may have employed for use.

"Despite this, Cyriacus was never bested in combat. He defended entire planets, strategizing with our commanders and soldiers, ensuring there were no holes in our defense."

Fasul smiled as his eyes seemed to look into the past.

"Yes, if it weren't for him we would have surely lost the war to the Half-Breed's much sooner than we did. He gave us hope, when all we had remaining were the solitary days of being murdered one by one as the Half-Breed's consumed our worlds."

Opening his eyes Fasul let his smile become strained slightly.

"From what I've heard from Catherine and Kelly it would seem you and him are both alike in those respects," Fasul said, then chuckled slightly. "When I felt the tremors through the Halo network, and realized that one of the Installations had been destroyed, you can imagine my surprise when I learned it was a Reclaimer. A single Reclaimer even. Ingenuity seems to be your strong suit, something that Cyriacus also possessed.

"I had the honor of being acquainted with him personally, and I knew much of his character," Fasul said, and he gazed down at the Spartan. "He seems to have been much like you, if what the others tell me is true. Perhaps the one crucial difference is that Cyriacus did not burry his emotions. No, he let them control him, and that made him a catalyst of sorts. It was this nature that inevitably led him to his death, but I shall not speak of such a thing here."

Fasul bent his frame downwards until his head hovered slightly over John's.

"Despite your unconscious state, I know that deep in the recess of your mind my words are being heard. This alone is the reason I am here, as I hope to explain the reasoning behind my decision.

"The Halo Installations communicate with one another on a constant basis. Telemetry data, security reports, and even artificial environment status are all sent to the many different facilities the Majal left behind. This station is unique in that I chose to create a copy of my mind and place it into this facility before we activated the Halo Installations. With that said, I have been given access to numerous data on the antics you humans have been apart of over these many years. The so-called Covenant as well have been brought to my attention, and I am surprised they became the universal terror that they are now.

"Before the activation of the Halo Installations that commenced the cleansing of the universe, the Majal tasked themselves with creating and maintaining facilities on nearly every planet we thought the Half Breeds might come to inhabit once they entered a dormant state. It was our intention to monitor their slumber, and be kept aware of their stasis and more importantly, the event of their awakening."

Fasul reared back to his full height and began moving about the room

once again.

"Near the end of the war, we received word that the Half-Breeds had learnt of the Halo Installations, and were constructing a counter to them. One of the main planets the Half-Breeds inhabited also happened to be under the most surveillance. We discovered that they were breeding a new creature, I believe they are now called 'Prophets' in that Covenant abomination."

Fasul chuckled to himself lightly.

"To think they would give themselves such a name, when all they were intended to be were nothing more than servants for the Half-Breeds. We sacrificed many soldiers to retrieve specimens of these 'Prophets' and after interrogation and intense studying of their biological makeup, we learned of their secret.

"The 'Prophets' were an advanced Flood form. The Half-Breeds basically mutated the Flood DNA to the point where it bore only a small resemblance to the disgusting filth they once originated from. There were some differences; the Prophets were significantly weaker than the Half-Breeds, but stronger than the typical Flood forms. They also aged at a slow pace, but their regenerative abilities were minute. Perhaps the most important difference, is that the Prophets did not need to continuously feed in order to survive, unlike the Half-Breeds and the Flood. This, plus the invulnerability to the Halo weapons, essentially ensured the Prophets would continue to live even after the Halo Installations were fired."

The A.I hologram stopped his pacing and shook his head.

"I'm getting terribly off track. I apologize."

Fasul composed himself and took on a look of intense seriousness.

"The initial augmentations will do their task and bring your body to a state where it will be capable of using the Reclaimer suit without destroying yourself. An unfortunate side effect to possessing the armor used by a previous Reclaimer is that your mind will begin to change as well. Memories that Cyriacus experienced will soon merge with your own, and in time your own consciousness will recede, and 'Cyriacus' will take root and come to control your body.

"I assure you this is not an act of ill will towards you. I am certain that you are a fine warrior, but the last transmission I received from the planet where the Half-Breeds sleep was quite troubling, and if what I fear is true, then this universe will need 'Cyriacus' power to escape the fate it met more than one hundred thousand years ago.

"If you are strong enough however, maybe you will be able to overcome 'Cyriacus' influence and remain in control, but whether that will come to pass or not, I cannot say."

Fasul looked away momentarily, and he spoke as his eyes settled onto the wall beside the Master Chief's body.

"The other side effect of being so suddenly thrown into the armor of the Reclaimer, is that the more you fight, the more the strain on

your body becomes. We trained our Reclaimers from a very young age to be able to withstand the trials put before them when they became true Reclaimers, and I know that you have not. In short order, your body will begin to destroy itself from the inside. Your muscles will tear, your bones will shatter, and your organs will cease to function."

Fasul finally let his gaze return to the Spartan.

"You will die."

"Sir! Slip Space whispers are being detected," a Jiralhanae announced.

Canderus glanced towards the main display inside the bridge.

"Give me a visual on the intended vector," the Commander ordered. He turned and glanced at the Prophet of Serenity. "This is likely to be the reinforcements for the Sangheili."

The Prophet of Serenity scoffed indignantly and laughed.

"They can bring a thousand ships for all the good it will do them. Once we eliminate their pitiful forces on this planet, then we shall move to their home world and finish off their race once and for all."

_If they brought a thousand ships, perhaps we may engage in an actual battle, instead of this pathetic artillery exchange, _Canderus mused to himself as the displays came to life. Looking closely at the empty space, he could see the telltale signs of a coming Slip Space tear.

"Order the fleet to prepare for counter attacks by the Sangheili fleet," Canderus ordered. "It would not do to let the emergence of the other ships to distract us."

"Yes sir," the Jiralhanae responded.

I wonder what the Sangheili will do? Should they decide to simply emerge and link up with their forces, they will be resigning themselves to a slow death. If the commander of their fleet is smart, he will force us to split our own fleet into two to deal with them.

The sudden explosion of light on the displays signified the emergence of twelve Covenant cruisers from Slip Space. The ships had a few moments of lifelessness before they fired off an impressive salvo of Plasma Cannon fire at Canderus' fleet.

"A bold move for such a small fleet," Canderus mused as he heard the commanders of his ships order evasive actions.

"Twelve ships?" the Prophet of Serenity asked incredulously. "The heathens are foolish to even think of trying to fight against our forces with such a pathetic display of contempt for our might."

I am growing tired of your ramblings, fool, Canderus thought as he

ignored the Prophet.

"Dispatch twenty ships and pull into position zero-seven-five in relation to the new Sangheili fleet. The rest of our forces will continue to monitor the remaining ships above the Eastern sector," Canderus informed the bridge.

Command is a lonely position, the Jiralhanae mused. _I miss my early days when I commanded a single ship, and could exercise my skills with my own hand. Now I am forced to depend on my soldiers to do the jobs I dictate for them. I am nothing more than a strategist._

The Sangheili have disappointed me with this small show of force. I had hoped they would gather all of their forces and return to Danrun in an amazing display of solidarity, ready to tear the Covenant apart. It would seem they have sent these sacrificial lambs to be fodder while their main force retreats into the depths of the universe.

"Arbiter! We've received a message from the scouts sent forward. The coordinates of the main Covenant fleet have been uploaded to the firing solutions for every ship in the fleet!" the navigation officer said, his tone showing his anticipation.

"Excellent," Aonlum replied. "Ensure the other ships wait the necessary time before we exit Slip Space. We need this to be coordinated flawlessly, or our risk might be all for nothing."

The Sangheili officer nodded intently and returned to his station, ready to coordinate with the other ships.

Aonlum stood, tense in his musings as he watched the small countdown to when the fleet would emerge from Slip Space.

It was an incredible gamble. Sending a small scouting force out first, and having them pinpoint the main Covenant fleet's positions. After the Covenant dispatched a small force to deal with the scouts, they would send the coordinates of the enemy fleet in a highly encoded message sporadically until they received acknowledgement that they had been received.

Sending messages of any form to a ship currently in the Slip Stream was highly irregular, and more often than not it resulted in the ship never receiving the message, and missing vital information. Aonlum had tried his best to stack the odds in their favor by having all twelve ships that initially emerged near Danrun to continuously send the message at microsecond intervals.

As he heard the acknowledgments from the other ships in the fleet, Aonlum realized the gamble had paid off, but next came an even bigger gamble, and if it succeeded, then it would yield an even greater pay off. It might even give their forces hope for winning this war.

Order and Faith had slowly moved away from the main Covenant fleet

to observe the brimming battle between the dispatched Covenant ships, and the Sangheili vessels that had appeared through Slip Space only moments previously.

Canderus had felt tired with watching the battles from afar, so he ignored the Prophet of Serenity's objections and moved the Forerunner ship into a backup position with the Covenant ships as they began the slow but deadly process of outmaneuvering the Sangheili fleet.

It was his critical eye that allowed Canderus to catch the small hint of the terror that was about to befall the Covenant fleet. One of the displays had been directed in the wrong direction, and was placed viewing behind the Order and Faith, giving him a view of the large Covenant fleet floating more or less motionlessly above the Western bloc of Danrun. The small tremble of light that was appearing several thousands of miles behind the fleet was his first indication that something was wrong.

He received vindication for those thoughts a moment later, when a Slip Space tear larger than he had ever seen suddenly appeared in the space he had been studiously observing.

The shapes of hundreds of ships emerging was the only thing he could see initially, for it was only half a second before the entire emerging fleet suddenly fired off the largest salvo of weapons fire he had ever witnessed in his life. Even the process of cleansing the human planets had never looked like this.

Incredible. Using the small force as a diversion and then allowing the main force to arrive in nearly the opposite position in relation to the planet. Then launching an attack instantly upon their arrival in the system, Canderus thought to himself in amazement. But how did they know where our fleet would be positioned? Making a blind attack immediately out of a Slip Space emersion is incredibly dangerous, as you risk striking your own forces, or even worse a wayward planet.

The pulsing red plasma flames etched across the sky, screaming towards the Covenant fleet which had just begun to realize their impending doom, and were trying to activate evasive measures.

Of course! The lead ships were scouts, and their purpose was two-fold. Using themselves not only as a distraction for the main fleet, but also to pinpoint our fleet's positions and give the coordinates to the ships still in transit inside the Slip Stream.

Canderus couldn't help but grin over the amazing display of tactical brilliance. The Sangheili commander that had orchestrated this movement was a genius of military tact, as he had just caught Canderus and his fleet completely off guard.

"Order the main force to initiate evasive measures now!" Canderus shouted, surprising many of the Jiralhanae on the bridge who had not yet seen the emergence of the real Sangheili fleet. "Bring the ship about to coordinates seven-four-zero and prepare to fire on the enemy fleet at the other side of our ships."

Beside Canderus, the Prophet of Serenity finally seemed to have noticed what was happening, at the precise moment the opening salvo

of fire from the Sangheili fleet slammed into the main Covenant forces, which had become clustered together, thus making them easy targets.

"This is inconceivable!" the Prophet bellowed. "How could you let these heathens attack our mighty fleet?"

Canderus ignored the Prophet as he manually switched the displays to show him the damage the Sangheili fleet had incurred on the Covenant fleet.

Fifty? No, sixty cruisers were destroyed. Nearly a quarter of our forces destroyed in an instant. Incredible.

Canderus changed the view and twisted the display so he could see the Sangheili fleet that had just emerged, which was now moving into a defensive cluster, trading haphazard shots with the bulk of the Covenant fleet. His eyes settled onto one of the Sangheili ships, and he felt a smirk test the corners of his mouth.

"Open up a visual channel with the Sangheili ship, _Honor Without Mercy_. I wish to speak to it's commander," Canderus ordered. His eyes lingered on the other Forerunner vessel, _Forgotten Legacy_, which was now clumped between many Covenant cruisers that had formed a protective ring around it.

As if a Forerunner ship has anything to worry about from any show of force. The Prophet aboard that ship is wasting my assets, and endangering my soldiers.

Canderus looked impatiently at the communications officer when he realized the linkup between the ships had not been established yet.

"Did I stutter?" Canderus asked, not unkindly. "Open a link with the Commander of the Sangheili fleet."

The Prophet of Serenity seemed to be shocked into silence as he kept his aged eyes glued to the displays showing the destruction the Sangheili had inflicted. Canderus was simply pleased that the aged creature was no longer trying to order him around.

The central display on the bridge quickly came to life, and Canderus found himself looking at a Sangheili clad in ceremonial armor. It took him a moment to recognize it.

"Ah, an Arbiter. What an interesting surprise," Canderus said.

"If you have come to ask for terms to your surrender," the Arbiter replied, his voice deadly cold. "Then I shall tell you that there will be none."

A short bark of a laugh escaped Canderus' throat over the Arbiter's display of bravado.

"I would not expect there to be one," he replied. "I can tell this will surely be an interesting battle, I look forward to the outcome."

"The outcome will be the destruction of the Covenant, and the revenge

we Sangheili deserve for the murder you Jiralhanae conducted aboard _High Charity_."

He is an honest Sangheili, Canderus thought. _If the news of what he did on the other Sacred Ring are true, this is a warrior worthy of fighting._

"Tell me, Arbiter, did you kill Tartarus with your own hand?" Canderus asked, careful to keep his tone even.

The Arbiter looked slightly surprised that Canderus would have put the two together so quickly.

"Yes, he died by my hand. He believed in the falsehood of the Prophet's lies, and he would not turn from that path. Because of that, I killed him."

"I see," Canderus replied. "Then we have both lost much in this new war. You have lost your soldiers, and I my own brother. When this battle is over with, I shall wish to test your strategies against my own. Perhaps there is not so much difference between our races as we might think."

The surprise that flashed across the Arbiter's face gave Canderus some amusement. As much as the Sangheili despised the Jiralhanae, the reverse was much worse. The Arbiter had likely never anticipated meeting a Jiralhanae that would not despise him for simply existing.

"The opening strike has gone to you, Arbiter, but I assure you that before this battle is over we shall find ourselves in similar positions."

The transmission cut out quickly and Canderus got to his feet to work the stiffness from his legs.

"Why would you speak to such a creature?" the Prophet of Serenity demanded. "He is a traitor to the Great Journey, and one that must be destroyed at all costs."

"Do not trouble yourself, Prophet," Canderus replied. "He is a skilled warrior, but there exists no weapon in the Sangheili arsenal capable of defeating a Forerunner vessel. Regardless of his skill, the outcome of this battle has already been foreseen."

"What exactly is it you want me to do?" Jan asked.

Sergeant Johnson had led her on a long, winding trip throughout the _Lewis Puller_, which finally came to a stop in the Marine barracks.

"What I want you to do, and what your gonna do are two very different things," Johnson said seriously as he slipped a combat knife from his boot into his hand and sliced open a shrink-wrapped fatigue vest. He flipped the vest open and checked the size.

"Damn, I can never figure out what the stupid measurements are," the

soldier commented as he grabbed another shrink-wrapped package and repeated the slicing motion with his knife. As he fiddled with the clothing, Jan was somewhat blatantly gazing at the bionic arm that he now had in place.

"What does it feel like?" Jan asked suddenly. She turned away in embarrassment when Johnson looked at her in confusion. "That arm I mean."

"Heh," Johnson smirked as he pulled his sleeve back, exposing the metallic limb. "The docs on board tell me that it looks so weird because they don't have the materials on the ship to make it look like a human limb and not this metal monstrosity, but to tell the truth I kinda like it."

He flexed the single metal digits that represented his fingers, and smiled at Jan.

"It feels a little odd, but I'm starting to get used to it. My reaction time is a little down I think, but that's to be expected I guess. Not like this is my real arm or nothin."

With a final look of bemusement, Johnson turned back around and picked up a flak jacket. He studied it for a moment before walking over to Jan and holding it up against her front.

"I think this'll fit," he said. "How big are your breasts?"

Jan flushed crimson for a moment before throwing the jacket off to the side.

"None of your business," she said hotly. "What's the matter with you?"

Johnson quickly held up his arms in a mock shield as if expecting Jan to attack him.

"I wasn't trying to be perverted dammit. Some of the other female Marines tell me that when they get a fatigue jacket that's too tight across the chest, it can mess up their aim when they fire off the larger assault rifles."

"Oh," Jan offered lamely. "Well you might think about asking with a little more tact next time."

"Noted," Johnson said, then reached down to retrieve the jacket Jan had tossed aside. "Now, try this on."

Jan wordlessly accepted the piece of clothing, slipping her arms into the sleeves. She tested her flexibility while wearing it, bending back and to the sides.

"It fits all right?"

"Like a glove," Jan replied. "What's with playing dress-up? Is there something going on that I don't know about."

"Captain Keyes told me that before the Covenant came to Earth, you had tried to sign up for the UNSC," Johnson said, pulling a fresh pair of trousers free. "But you got turned down cause your too

young."

"And that hasn't changed yet," Jan pointed out. "I'm still seventeen years old, and that means I can't legally join the UNSC."

"That's where your wrong," Sergeant Johnson said. "Now that we've been detached to help the extradited Covenant, that means the highest ranking person around is Captain Keyes, so what she says goes, and nobody here is going to try and contradict her. So when she had me hustle my ass up to the deck a few hours ago, the Captain was nice enough to inform me that she thought it might be a good idea if I took the time to get you into uniform."

"Your serious?" Jan asked disbelievingly. Johnson nodded.

"Completely. So, when a lowly Sergeant like me gets an order from the highest ranking soldier in the UNSC this side of the universe, you can bet I get off my ass and make sure whatever I got told to do gets done, as quickly and as efficiently as possible."

Jan couldn't help but smile at Johnson's words.

"Well, what are the terms of my service then?" she asked. Johnson leaned back and smiled, displaying his teeth which looked very white against his black skin.

"Unconditional service up to the end of this war, plus eight months."

"Eight months, huh?" Jan said. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"Tell you what," Johnson said. "If you sign up right now, I'll knock one month off, and make you a Corporal."

Jan laughed as she extended her hand.

"Deal."

Johnson looked down at her hand and shook his head.

"Your in the Marines now, and Marines don't shake hands," he pointed out. Jan quickly caught on, and brought her extended hand up to her forehead, giving the sergeant a field-grade salute.

"That's more like it," Johnson said, returning her salute and handing her the rest of the fatigues. "Get changed into those and come meet me outside."

As Jan left to go change, Johnson moved to the door leading out into the main hallway. He had just stepped outside when he heard the alarm klaxon begin to sound.

"Attention all crew members. Exiting Slip Space in five minutes, all personnel are asked to move to their stations, and all off-duty soldiers to immediately return to their squads."

_What the hell? Captain Keyes said we had at least five more hours till we reached our

destination._

Captain Miranda Keyes was feeling very uneasy. It wasn't enough that the human race seemed doomed to be either consumed by the Flood, or destroyed by the remaining members of the Covenant. No, now she had to contend with fighting alongside a group of creatures who were at one time dedicated to seeing humanity become nothing but a distant memory. As if that wasn't enough either, now she was finding out that something had gone wrong during their last Slip Space jump.

"Ma'am," the navigations officer, a Lieutenant (J.G) by the name of Clair Feldt, said somewhat lamely. "I didn't notice that our trajectory had changed until the ship's A.I informed me that we were within our intended destination only ten minutes ago."

"Aren't you supposed to be checking our course almost hourly Lieutenant?" Keyes asked tiredly. "As a navigator you should know that the Slip Stream is notorious for sending faster or slower than we might think."

"Yes Ma'am," Lieutenant Feldt said remorsefully.

Keyes fought the urge to emit a sigh as she slowly massaged the building pressure between her eyes. The officer had made a mistake, but worrying about it was only going to delay they're available options.

"Forget it," Keyes said. "I need to know what we can do now."

"We have two options. Either we go past our intended exit from Slip Space, which risks blowing the drives and having us emerge in an uninhabited galaxy, completely stranded without any means to go anywhere, or we simply hit the intended target as best we can, and hope like hell there's nothing in our way."

Great, Keyes muttered in his mind. _Either risk getting stranded, or risk finding ourselves emerge from Slip Space and cross our fingers that we don't appear in an asteroid field._

Regardless of the risks, there was only one real option.

"I suppose we have no choice but to make the target exit jump," Keyes said. "How much time do we have?"

Lieutenant Feldt quickly checked her notes.

"Five minutes."

It was surprising how quickly a battle in space could turn against you. The Sangheili fleet had caught the Covenant off guard, and destroyed an enormous chunk of their force in one single salvo of fire. This hadn't phased the Covenant however, as their superior numbers soon started to show as the Sangheili fleet found themselves worked into a tight-knit group near the second moon of Danrun.

_The damned Forerunner vessels are to blame for the majority of our

loses. Their shields are near impervious, and their range of fire is nearly double that of my cruisers._

Aonlum furrowed his brow as he contemplated his available strategies.

Attacking the Forerunner ship would perhaps make the Prophet's aboard wary, and they would order the Captain's to back off, allowing Aonlum some leeway in working his fleet into a position where he might be able to strike at the Covenant cruisers. Once he destroyed them, he could attempt to force the Forerunner vessels into a corner of the planet and try and board them, a feat that Aonlum admitted was quite easier said than done.

A plasma cannon shot from three quarters of our ships would give them pause I should think.

"Order all ships between coordinates five-three-zero and five-nine-one to open fire on the Forerunner vessel. Target the _Forgotten Legacy_, and to let fly any available weapons," Aonlum spoke from his seat high on the bridge, and got affirmative nods from the other crewmen down below.

Aonlum worked his mandibles nervously as he watched the head displays. This would either drive the Forerunner ship away from the Covenant fleet, or it would enrage the Covenant and they would move in for the kill.

The bridge shook heavily for a moment, signaling that _Honor Without Mercy_ had fired its main plasma cannon. With a quick check of the displays, Aonlum could see that the ships he had indicated earlier were firing as well.

Dear God let this work.

A dissatisfied look crossed his face when many of the Covenant cruisers threw themselves in the path of the shots.

Blind fools. The Forerunner ship wouldn't be in any danger even if some of our shots were to break through its shielding. I'm not sure anything can pierce the hulls of those ships.

Despite the suicidal actions of the Covenant ships, a good portion of the shots fired from the Sangheili ships managed to strike the Forerunner ship, _Forgotten Legacy_, and Aonlum watched intently as the ship's shields flared brightly before dying out.

With a curse Aonlum turned his head aside. None of the shots had struck the ship itself, and from the gathering energy beside the Forerunner ship, it looked like it was about to return fire.

Wait, that's not from the Forerunner ship.

Aonlum looked closer at the main display, his eyes focused on the light that seemed to be billowing and growing directly off the starboard side of the Forerunner ship.

What in all the Hells is that?

"Exiting Slip Space in ten seconds," Lieutenant Feldt announced, her eyes glued to the display in front of her.

Captain Keyes felt her hands tighten on her seat at the head of the bridge, as the seconds ticked down in her mind.

"Engaging primary engine power," a yeoman off to the side declared.

"I'm detecting something directly on the other side of the jump point," Feldt said. "I can't get a good enough reading to say what it is."

Let's hope its not bigger than us, Keyes thought as ten seconds finally passed.

"Exiting Slip Space now!"

A glorious flash of light assaulted all those in the bridge, and then the ship began to shake as if it were tearing apart.

Canderus was watching the Sangheili fleet with amusement after their last act of defiance when a Jiralhanae manning the sonar jumped to his feet.

"Energy spike detected! Something's making a Slip Space exit!"

"Where?" Canderus demanded, intent on not having the same thing happen the last time something arrived uninvited to the battle.

The Jiralhanae peered closely at his terminal.

"Right in the middle of the fleet!" the creature announced in surprise.

Canderus opened his mouth to demand a visual on the fleet when the displays quickly changed to show the Forerunner ship, _Forgotten Legacy_. The communications officer had obviously anticipated his order.

The Jiralhanae Commander watched as the Forerunner ship, whose shields were still down from the Sangheili salvo that had struck only moments before, suddenly disappeared from view. A giant tear in space appeared, the explosion of energy rippling across the _Forgotten Legacy_. The Forerunner ship had no time to move when out of the tear in space, came an enormous ship that Canderus barely identified as one that was designed and used by the humans. The ships were weak and slow compared to the Covenant cruisers, but they were enormous in size, and the humans had shown in the past their ability to use them as ramming devices.

With the shields down, and the damage inflicted from the energy emission from the Slip Space tear, the _Forgotten Legacy_ could not withstand the sudden emersion and collision from a ship almost as

large as it was.

The bridge of the _Order and Faith_ grew deathly still as the displays showed the only other Forerunner vessel in the battle get sheared into two pieces as the human ship tore straight through it. Muted explosions appeared all over the Forerunner ship as it began to completely break apart.

Canderus watched in awe as the Forerunner vessel tore itself apart with explosions and slowly began to sink into the upper atmospheres of Danrun.

One of the ships once possessed by the Forerunner more than one hundred thousand years ago had just been destroyed before his very eyes, in only a few minutes.

The Jiralhanae Commander joined his fellow soldiers in their speechlessness.

Aonlum had been as surprised as the Covenant when the human ship had appeared, and then tore a hole straight through the Forerunner ship, severing it in half. Where the Covenant were dismayed, Aonlum was overjoyed.

"Dispatch as many ships as possible to lead the human ship into our fleet!" Aonlum ordered. "I will not let them be destroyed!"

As his orders were carried out, Aonlum quickly brought the communications officer to him and asked for him to set up a link with the human ship immediately. This was done so as quickly as the officer could manage. In only a few moments, Aonlum found himself looking at the female warrior he had met back on the Sacred Ring. Keyes was her name.

"You have no idea how pleased I am about your arrival Captain," Aonlum said. Keyes smiled at him hesitantly.

"Thank you Arbiter, we're pleased we could be of help, but truthfully that was pretty much blind luck," Keyes replied.

"Regardless, you have given our forces hope. Never would I have believed a Forerunner vessel could ever be destroyed, and in a single moment you have done just that. You have my eternal gratitude."

"We were detached from Earth to come see if we could be of some assistance to you and the Master Chief, where is he by the way?" Keyes asked, changing the subject.

"The Demon has left on a mission of his own, he assured me though that he would return in due time," Aonlum said. Keyes nodded her acceptance of the story, and Aonlum was pleased that she didn't press for details. It wouldn't be just to admit he had no clue as to where the Demon went.

"Once we're linked up with your fleet, we'll be ready to help fight. I've got a several companies of Marines ready for deployment on the planet if you need them," Keyes informed him.

"Their assistance will be needed. I shall dispatch several ships to lead them to our forces on the ground so that they may prepare for the eventual Covenant assault."

"Understood," Keyes said, and the display went blank.

As he returned to his seat at the head of the bridge, Aonlum felt a smile twinge the corners of his mouth.

Perhaps hope is what we started with, but now it seems we have victory within our grasp.

The Attrition silently tore a hole in space as it emerged from Slip Space at the far end of the solar system housing the Covenant home world. The ship was operating at an incredibly small power output, so as to escape detection by the ships engaged in battle above the planet.

"Well, it looks like Cortana was right," Dr. Halsey said from her seat in the copilot's seat in the somewhat crowded cockpit. Kelly was seated beside her in the pilot's seat and Cortana was on the pedestal in-between them while Fasul stood stoically behind all of them.

"The Covenant really are fighting each other," Kelly said in amazement.

"How do you plan on entering the planet with so much destruction going on?" Fasul asked. Dr. Halsey frowned slightly as she looked at the muted explosions in the distance. The Attrition was small, but it would only take one round from the plasma cannons on those Covenant cruisers to take it out.

"I suppose for now our best bet would be to wait out the fighting, and in the meantime try and get as close as possible without being detected. Can you manage that Cortana?"

"Yes Ma'am," the A.I replied as the ship began to slowly accelerate. Dr. Halsey wasn't sure but she was beginning to think that Cortana's attitude had slightly soured since they left the Majal facility. Unfortunately she wouldn't know for sure without asking, and Dr. Halsey wasn't about to do that.

"How's John doing?" she asked instead as she stretched out the stiffness in her joints from the long flight.

"The Reclaimer is doing fine," Fasul said. "He will need rest before he can even think of moving about again. At the moment I would imagine that he is lost in his dreams."

Where am I?

"No matter what happens, I will always protect you."

John felt himself become aware of his surroundings. The scenery melted into place around him, buildings, objects, and people all

seemed to form around his transient body. Finally the walls were constructed and the flooring appeared below his feet, though John noticed distractedly that his body was not touching any surfaces.

"The way your talking, you make it sound like something bad will happen."

The voice came from behind him, and John turned about, slightly surprised to see two humans lying on a bed. The room was a futuristic design, not unlike that of the Forerunner facilities he had seen before. There was a slight domestic touch to the room that had never been present in anything the Forerunner built, and John subconsciously concluded it had to do with the young woman that was curled up alongside the man inside the bed.

As he peered closer, he was surprised to see that the female looked startlingly similar to Jan.

"I spoke with Fasul this morning," the human male said. The language was foreign to him, but he could understand them somehow, inside his mind.

"Are you going to leave?" the woman asked, slight fear touching her voice. The male responded by hugging her closer to him and stroking her hair.

"Only for a short while. Fasul tells me that the Half Breeds are preparing to lay siege to one of our strongholds in the northern sector of the Capula Sector. Evacuations are being ordered but they'll need me to hold the defensive lines. I won't be long, maybe a few months at most."

"Will you promise to be back in less than seven months?"

"Of course," he answered instantly. "Why seven months? Are you planning something?"

"Its just that I'd hate for you to miss the birth of our first child," the woman said coyly, running her index finger down the male's chest. The man quickly sat upright and grasped the woman by the shoulders.

"You're pregnant?" he asked in surprise. The woman nodded shyly, ducking her head slightly so the man wouldn't see the blush tinting her cheeks. With a cry of joy he suddenly scooped her up into his arms and jumped to his feet, laughing grandly as he spun her around the room.

"No matter what," he said, setting her back down on the bedding. "I will be back in time to see my child born. The entire Half-Breed army can stand in my way, but I will tear the heavens apart to get back to you"

The couple kissed intensely, and the scenery began to melt away, so that nothing remained before John but the two humans.

Where the hell am I? John asked once again inside his mind. Finally the couple faded away, and John was bathed in darkness. The dark began to pull away however, and another scene began to form around

him. This time the futuristic room was replaced with the wreckage and chaos that could only be produced by war. In the distance a city burned intensely, explosions from weapons unseen could be heard in the background.

John stood upon a high mark. A hillside that looked down upon an open valley. Down below the city that burned with feverish intensity seemed to be the only source of light provided for his surroundings.

"I am sorry Cyriacus," another foreign voice said beside him. "They took the city before our forces could mobilize."

The speaker was a Forerunner. One of the Pure Bloods. He looked much like the Forerunner A.I that John had spoken to about the origins of the Halo Installations.

"Where is Chrysanthe?" another voice asked, and John recognized it as the man from the previous scene.

"At the fourth quarter of her term we transferred her to a home in the eastern sector. I felt that the gardens in my home would give her peace and ease the discomfort that she faced during her pregnancy. The Half Breeds took the city before I could get to her," the Forerunner said, and John could hear the pain in his voice.

The human male, Cyriacus, was clad in the armor of a Reclaimer. His visor was lifted so that he could stare at the burning city without obstruction. John could see the anguish on his face, illuminated by the red glow from the fires below.

"Then she is dead?" Cyriacus asked, his voice rough. "What about our child, did she carry it to birth?"

"Yes my friend," the Forerunner responded. "You had a young girl. She looked to be as beautiful as her mother."

A strangled cry arose from Cyriacus' throat and he fell to his knees, tears running down his face.

"Had Chrysanthe chosen a name?" he asked after a long pause. The Forerunner hesitated slightly and Cyriacus suddenly reared to his feet.

"I will know the name of my daughter!" he cried. "I will burn her name into my heart so that I will know of whom I shall be enacting my vengeance for! I WILL KILL THE HALF BREEDS IN HER NAME!"

"Laeliaâ€|your child's name was Laelia."

A wistful look passed over Cyriacus and a saddened smile appeared.

"Laelia," he said, testing the name on his lips. "She named her after my mother."

"Cyriacusâ€|my friendâ€|my brother," the Forerunner said, setting his palm upon the human's shoulder. "I cannot begin to imagine your pain. However we must flee this planet. The Half Breed's will send the

Flood out to harvest the corpses soon, and we will be discovered."

"Go Fasul," Cyriacus said, his voice devoid of emotion. The visor on the armor slapped shut by an unknown force, and Cyriacus began to walk towards the towering inferno in the valley below.

"Do not throw your life away!" Fasul shouted after him. "There are too many of them! Cyriacus! CYRIACUS!"

Cyriacus' figure disappeared, and the scenery once again melted away, and John was now floating in a room filled with a bright white light.

"I never found their bodies."

John spun around in surprise, and came face to face with Cyriacus. He was clad in broken and shredded armor that bore a small resemblance to the mighty armor of the Reclaimer. His body was bruised and his flesh torn savagely.

"Before I could reach the Eastern Sector, the Flood had alerted the Half Breed's of my presence. Thousands of them descended onto the city, eager to kill me and harvest my body so that they could reap the benefits of consuming a body filled with the power that coursed through my veins. I fought with my entire being, but I never reached Chrysanthe and Laelia. They died and I did nothing to protect them.

"I promised Chrysanthe that no matter what I would always protect her, and I failed her. She was my flower. My spirit. I was killed by the Half Breeds before I could find her, and protect her body from becoming food for them. I never even saw my child."

John watched in silence as Cyriacus wept silently. He felt something wet touch his cheek and raised a hand to touch it and was shocked to see that he was crying as well.

"We have both felt the pain of losing those most important to us. I lost my beloved and my child, and you have lost your brothers and sisters. Your warriors," Cyriacus said softly. He extended his hand to John and cupped it almost tenderly against his cheek.

"Come with me, brother. I will take away your pain and give you the peace you so dearly desire."

Take away all my painâ€¦|

John placed his hand in Cyriacus', and felt himself begin to fade into darkness. His mind grew heavy and consciousness began to slip away.

"I will destroy our enemies my brother," Cyriacus' voice pierced through the darkness, as the final vestiges of awareness disappeared.

I wish for nothing more than some semblance of peaceâ€¦|

His eyes shot open, and he found himself staring at the bulkhead above him. The curved metal stared back at him lifelessly. He was

lying in one of the many small beds provided aboard the Covenant ship. Slowly he pushed himself to his feet and removed the blankets that had been draped over his body.

He stepped from the bed and crossed the room to where a set of doors stood. Passing through them he emerged in a small equipment storage room. His eyes lingered on the armor that was standing at the far end of the room, and he compulsively walked towards it.

As he grew closer a ringing began to emerge from somewhere, and it shot lances of pain throughout his skull. The noise grew sharper until he finally couldn't stand it any longer.

A grunt of pain echoed through the room as he held his head between his hands, clenching his eyes shut painfully against the noise. His senses seemed to scream back at him, his thoughts nothing more than a jumbled mass of past battles and pain.

His hand came away from his head, and reached forward, touching the armor of the Reclaimer. As quickly as the noise came it suddenly disappeared, and his body returned to normal. After a moment he moved away from the armor, and walked towards the small porthole that offered a look at the deep expanse of space outside.

A great battle was taking place before him. Ships exploded with wondrous fury, and fire burned on the distant planet, echoing the terror of war and power being displayed.

I had better suit up, Fasul will be waiting for me on the planet with my orders.

A lance of pain shot through his skull suddenly. Something was wrong, he shouldn't know that name. A voice was shouting inside his mind, screaming against the pain.

John? Why John? My name is Cyriacusâ€¦|

Memories flooded back to him in an instant. Battles, pain, love, and the bitter taste of defeat. Images of his wife appeared, his beloved Chrysanthe, and in her arms she held his child. Laelia. There images shifted, showing his two loves lying upon the ground, their bodies twisted and mutated by the Flood, ready to be taken by the Half Breeds.

They took them from me! I couldn't protect themâ€¦|

Next came the images of soldiers, dressed in armor that he recognized, but had never seen before in his life.

Spartansâ€¦|why do I know that name? Why does their images make my heart grow heavy?

Tendrils of flame seemed to lick at his body, and Cyriacus fell to his knees as pain and heartache wracked his body. Memories of loss filled him, showing him images that were both familiar and foreign to him.

They took everything from me!

My Spartans died because of them!

Chrysanthe and Laeliaâ€|nothing more than food for the Half Breeds!

They destroyed my home. My people have suffered for so long because of the Covenant!

Time passed, and Cyriacus finally stood, his mind clear. The pain was gone, and the screaming inside his mind had retreated, leaving nothing but the desire for one thing.

Vengeance.

"Rear docking bay door opening. Unauthorized override of the system," Cortana announced over the ship's internal com channel.

"What?" Dr. Halsey asked in surprise, bolting upright in her seat. "Give us a visual."

"Yes Ma'am."

The occupants of the small bridge inside the ship stared at the lone display with trepidation. Each knew of only one other individual aboard who could have exited the ship, but neither Dr. Halsey nor Kelly chose to speak his name.

The Forerunner A.I however, was more inclining than the both of them.

"It would seem your warrior has lost his battle."

The words of the ancient being were joined with the display coming to life, and giving them a perfect view of the Master Chief, clad in the armor of the First Reclaimer, as he propelled himself away from their ship, using small jet propulsion devices built into the soles of the armor, and jetted towards the Covenant home world.

"I don't understand," Halsey said, turning to look at the Forerunner. "You said that John wouldn't be able to awaken for over a week."

"Indeed I did," the Forerunner nodded once, then pointed at the display as the Master Chief slowly became smaller in their view. "The one you call John is no longer conscious. What you see moving towards that planet is Cyriacus, the first Reclaimer, and now the last."

The confusion of Halsey's face amused the Forerunner slightly, and he quickly continued.

"The armor built by we Forerunner to combat the Half Breeds, was not meant to be used by any other creatures. The armor itself synchronizes with its host's mind, and the two become one. Your 'Master Chief' is a descendant of Cyriacus, the blood that flows within him is that of the oldest race of humans. I decided to bestow upon him the armor of Cyriacus because I believed he would be capable of wielding it.

"The enhancements to his genetic makeup were necessary for him to control the armor, and still manage to live afterwards. Unfortunately it would seem that humans have grown weaker over time, and the augmentations I gave him will eventually prove too great for his body to handle. Once that moment comes to pass, his body will destroy itself."

Dr. Halsey paled considerably and she slumped back into her seat.

"John will die?"

"I told you," the Forerunner began, his tone lightly scolding. "John no longer controls that body. I cannot say whether Cyriacus is in full control or not, but the fact that he is up and moving is enough indication for me to say that the man you knew no longer exists."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this?" Dr. Halsey demanded.

"If you knew before hand of the risks involved, there was a chance you would have interfered. I could not allow that to happen. The Flood have been freed of the confines of the Halo Installations, and if the murmurs between our networks are correct, then a Half Breed has awoken. More than ever a true Reclaimer is needed, and the only warrior alive capable of this was your 'Master Chief'.

"I apologize for the loss of your friend," Fasul said, his tone conveying a true sense of remorse. "This was necessary however. Cyriacus possessed strength of which I had never seen before. He was the only Reclaimer ever to have killed a Half Breed in ground combat."

"Is there any chance that John could be revived?" Kelly asked, speaking for the first time.

"It is unlikely," Fasul responded. "The intricacies of multiple interactions with the armor of the First Reclaimer were not clearly defined before the council decided to activate the Halo Installations. What I know is merely conjecture, but I do know for certain that the man you call 'John' will never be the same, even if he emerges from his stasis."

Halsey looked pained for a moment before turning away and looking at the display. The Master Chief was no longer visible.

"Cortana, can you track his course? Do you know where he's headed?"

"His current course will take him directly into the battle between the Covenant. Should he somehow pass through the battle cluster above the planet unscathed, he will pass through the exterior atmosphere of the planet and hit somewhere near the eastern defensive block of the Elites. Judging from some of the intercepts, it would seem a battle is currently taking place there," Cortana explained.

"There is one other thing you should know," Fasul began, and waited until he had everyone's attention.

"Cyriacus was a noble man, but he lost his wife and child before he

perished on our home world. His memories will have returned to him by now, and the rage he possessed before he died will have resurfaced.

"I witnessed his final battle," he said with something akin to horror touching his voice. His head shook slightly, clearing the images flooding his mind.

"If you have any forces within his projected path, then I advise you to order them out of the area immediately. Cyriacus will be unable to differentiate friend from foe at this point, and I pity those that will be caught in his path."

Halsey bit her lower lip in indecision for a moment. Trying to communicate with the Elite fleet would bring them to the attention of the Covenant as well. If they couldn't get behind the Elite lines in time the Covenant would surely destroy their small vessel. However, if the Forerunner was to be believed, than John was about to unleash the fires of Hell upon Danrun, and everyone caught in the middle was going to be killed.

"Cortana, open up a com linkup with the Elite ships."

"Yes Ma'am."

Several tense seconds passed until the display came to life and Dr. Halsey saw an Elite clad in ceremonial armor appear.

"This is Gann Aonlum, the Arbiter of the Sangheili," the Elite announced. His face was calm, a mask of serenity in the face of the overwhelming odds that his fleet faced.

"My name is Dr. Catherine Halsey, Arbiter, and I am conveying the message that a hostile target is heading towards the battle cluster you are currently occupying."

"Give me the coordinates," the Arbiter said quickly. "Have you a classification of the ship?"

"It is not a ship," Halsey said. "It's a human."

The Arbiter's face twisted into a confused look for a moment. Halsey opened her mouth to explain when Cortana interjected.

"It's the Master Chief, Arbiter. He's heading for the Covenant fleet, but we don't know if he'll change course and head for your own fleet just yet."

"The Demon has returned," the Arbiter exclaimed in astonishment, a slow grin working its way onto his face. "I shall alert my ships not to target him, you have my word."

"We didn't contact you for the Master Chief's safety, Arbiter," Cortana said. "We did so for your own."

"I don't understand."

"There isn't sufficient time to explain this yet, but you need to know that right now the Master Chief is incapable of distinguishing between friendly and enemy forces. You should also alert ground

forces in the vicinity that if the Master Chief passes through the battle cluster above the planet that they should immediately evacuate."

"A battle is being waged in Gestahl as we speak," the Arbiter said. "The Covenant are attacking our fortified positions with incredible force. If we relinquish our positions for even a moment the city shall fall. Surely I cannot give such an order."

"If you don't give the order, then the city will be destroyed with even more casualties."

"There are over three hundred thousand soldiers in Gestahl, and the Covenant have at least triple our forces. The Demon is a skilled warrior but he could not pose such a grand threat."

Fasul stepped in front of Halsey, allowing the Arbiter to catch a glimpse of him. The Elite gasped with surprise at the sight.

"This 'Demon' has now become the epitome of the word. His power is unlike anything you'll have ever witnessed. Even if every last soldier on this planet were to try and kill him, the result would be the same. Trust me young one, send the order to retreat."

Aonlum closed his eyes and breathed audibly. The toils of the battle were beginning to show in his body, as his entire being seemed to ache.

That human has a Forerunner aboard her ship, and the ancient being is telling me that the Master Chief has lost his mind? Whatever has happened I will do my best to find out.

"Send the following to all allied troops," Aonlum announced to his bridge operators, and waited for the communications linkup to be setup. With a nod from the Sangheili manning the ship's communications, Aonlum readied himself.

I cannot tell them that it is the Master Chief who is coming. Many of my Commanders know of him, and will wonder why I am taking such grand precautions to protect them from him.

"My brothers, we are partaking in a goal noble enough that the Gods themselves have sent a messenger of divinity on our behalf. He shall soon pass through the Covenant fleet and slam into the planet below, prepared to tear the Covenant forces asunder. His power is great however, and we shall need to give him a wide berth. I am ordering the immediate evacuation of all civilian and military personnel in Gestahl."

Aonlum turned to the communications officer and spoke.

"Repeat this transmission for the next ten minutes until you are certain the message is clear. I will take no requests for further information from the other ships."

"Yes, Arbiter," the Sangheili responded enthusiastically.

"There is a target heading towards our fleet from the western sector," Aonlum said to the ship's radar operator. "Locate the target and give me his projected course."

"At once Arbiter," the operator replied.

It will take several hours before Gestahl is completely evacuated, and I do not think that the Demon will be kind enough to wait that longâ€¦

"Target is bearing on a projected course that will carry it through the Covenant fleet. If there are no sudden shifts in trajectory than it is likely it will impact the Forerunner ship," the operator announced.

"What is the ETA?"

"Thirty-seven seconds."

My God, how fast is the Demon traveling?

"Give me a visual!" Aonlum demanded. The bridge crew worked hurriedly and the main display quickly filled with the darkness of space. Aonlum peered closely and was just able to make out the shape of the Demon.

"The target's course has yet to change sir!" the operator announced excitedly.

What on Earth are you doing Demon? The Forerunner vessels are strong enough to withstand hundreds of plasma cannon rounds. Surely you can't expect to harm it?

As if in reply to Aonlum's thoughts, the screen was able to capture the image of the Demon slamming through the outer shields of the Forerunner vessel as if they were not even there, just before an eruption of light bright enough to distort the video feed appeared.

"Status report!" Aonlum said intently.

"Unknown explosion occurred aboard the Forerunner vessel!" a Sangheili officer reported over the battle net. "Data arrays are corrupted by the influx of energy."

Damn! Aonlum thought angrily. His eyes were glued to the display, waiting for the video feed to return. It returned momentarily, and Aonlum felt his eyes grow wide.

"Display is back online," another Sangheili announced unnecessarily.

By the Gods! _The Demon tore a hole directly through the Forerunner vessel! How in all the Hells could he have broken through the vessel's shielding? Even the energy produced by a Slip Space tear isn't enough to tear it asunder._

"The Forerunner vessel has been hit directly within it's starboard engines!" a Sangheili proclaimed. "Its beginning to fall towards the planet!"

Shaken, Aonlum turned back to the display showing him the interior of the _Attrition_. The Forerunner still stood in view, a grim smile on his face, evidence enough that he had seen what the Master Chief had done to the Forerunner vessel.

"Tell me Forerunner," Aonlum said slowly. "What has happened to the Demon?"

"You may address me as Fasul," the Forerunner answered. "The title of Forerunner makes me uneasy. There is little my race accomplished to deserve such a burden."

>"Fasul then," Aonlum said.<p>

Fasul nodded his thanks on the display and turned slightly, allowing Aonlum a better look at his profile.

He is a construct?

"When this 'Demon' explained to me the current situation in the universe, it was my decision that he should inherit the armor of the First Reclaimer, a man by the name of Cyriacus. As you can see, the armor grants it's wearer a power nearly as great as the Half-Breeds."

"Half-Breed?" Aonlum questioned, confused.

"It isn't of importance," Fasul said casually. "For now I would ask that you dispatch several ships to retrieve us. Your enemies are distracted by what Cyriacus has done to their lead ship."

The visual linkup was severed and Aonlum stared blankly at the darkened screen.

He called the Demon 'Cyriacus'â€|what has happened?

"Release the _Conviction _and _Sacred Cubit_," Aonlum ordered. "I wish to speak with those aboard this ship, but it will have to wait until they are safely returned to our fleet."

With his orders being carried out, Aonlum relaxed his position and slumped against the small terminal in front of him. His eyes lingered on the display showing the Master Chief's decent into the higher atmospheres of the planet, Danrun.

Come Demon, tell me you have not lost your way just yet?

Canderus pulled himself slowly up from the deck. When the unidentified target had slammed into their shielding the Forerunner ship had shuddered violently, knocking all those unfortunate enough to not be sitting, hard into the deck.

The Prophet of Serenity was lying next to Canderus, his eyes open but unseeing. Stepping over carefully, Canderus saw that the Prophet had slammed his head into the lower step leading to the pilot's seat. His skull had been cracked open, most likely killing the creature instantly.

"Report!" Canderus bellowed as he turned away from the Prophet, trying to hide the relief he felt from no longer having to deal with the fool.

"Sir!" one of the few conscious Jiralhanae left on the bridge announced. "Reports from the engine room say that something passed straight through the ship. Decks three through seventeen have been breached."

Impossible! The Forerunner ships are made of a technology millennia more advanced than anything we've ever devised. Not even the Plasma Cannons can pierce it's shielding, let alone the actual ship itself.

"Do you have an image of what hit us?" Canderus asked. He realized with surprise that the bridge officer he was speaking to was the only other soldier conscious on the bridge. The Jiralhanae hurried over to another station and activated several controls. In an instant the central displays shifted into images of a figure, and for the first time, Canderus realized it was a human.

"Enhance the image," Canderus ordered. The section of the frame showing the human became larger.

"What is that human wearing?" the other Jiralhanae asked. Canderus finally pulled his eyes away, aware that his left arm was trembling.

"I do not know," Canderus replied. "Have you heard from the engine room? Can the ship still function?"

Canderus turned his eyes back onto the Prophet of Serenity.

I wonder if he had time to realize just how impregnable this ship turned out to be before he died? In a matter of hours, the 'barbarians' have destroyed the only Forerunner vessels remaining. Because of your insistence to send forth my ships without a care for defense, we are now outnumbered by our enemy.

"The engines have sustained critical damage!" the Jiralhanae shouted. "We can operate at seven percent efficiency, but only for several hours."

Canderus shook his head slowly in disbelief. What should have been a routing, had turned out to be a disaster.

"Order the fleet to retreat to the western skies over the planet. Leave twelve ships to guard the space above."

Canderus couldn't help the small smirk that fell onto his face as the ship shuddered lightly as they began their long retreat to the other side of the planet.

We've lost this battle. Arbiter, your name skills are as amazing as the rumors made them to be. Tartarus was a fool to think he could kill you. I look forward to our next meeting.

Cyriacus felt immeasurable forces crashing against his body as he began the long fall through the upper realms of the planet. The heat of reentry burned against his armor, and with a mental note the armor increased it's density, ensuring his skin would be left free of discomfort.

Our enemies have been given a taste of the Hell that we shall give them. For the lives of those we have lost, we shall return upon them a pain one hundredfold worse!

The heat slowly disappeared, and was replaced with the vicious lashing of the higher altitude winds. Cyriacus let the wind push his body, as he was already scanning the planet for the battle he had seen taking place aboard the other ship.

A few seconds and several thousand feet later, Cyriacus had pinpointed the coordinates and made the proper adjustments to his decent. He would land directly in the center of the battle, where he would be given the opportunity to kill as many of his enemy as possible.

The order from the Arbiter to evacuate Gestahl had come to the Allied forces at a very inopportune moment. The Covenant forces had started their initial assault hours ago, and after several hours of intense artillery barrages, the bulk of the enemy force had begun the trek towards the city limits. If they had tried to retreat, the Covenant would have obliterated them.

Jan was stationed up on the front lines of the defensive boundary. She, along with Sergeant Johnson, 'Eranumee and several other squads mixed with Elite, Hunter, and Grunt forces were occupying an industrious building that gave them a proper vantage point of the approaching enemy forces. It also made them a perfect target for the artillery rounds fired by the Covenant, but so far the building had managed to withstand the onslaught.

"Remember to keep your eyes of those goddamn Wraiths in the back ranks," Sergeant Johnson said, slipping the leather glove on that he used to cover his bionic hand. "Once the infantry get close enough they'll start lighting us up again so those sonsofbitches can just waltz right in here and slit our throats."

"The word has been passed down Sergeant," 'Eranumee replied from his position beside the one of the many open windows overlooking the coming battle. "All we can do now is wait, and hope that the Arbiter can keep the skies clear at least until we repel this attack."

"You really think we can hold the line?" Jan asked the exhausted-looking Elite.

"We must," 'Eranumee replied. "The Covenant will give no mercy to the many civilians that are unfortunate enough to be caught in this battle. Their blood will not be spilt so long as we stand between these bloodthirsty savages and them."

_It wasn't that long ago where that description would have covered you Elites as well, _Jan thought as she returned her attention to the

approaching army. They were only a few hundred feet from the lower defenses that encompassed the surrounded city.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell is that?"

Jan looked over at Johnson, expecting him to have spotted something out in the gathering enemy forces, but instead his gaze was concentrated upwards, towards the blood-red sky.

Up amongst the cloud's she could see a streaking object. It was moving incredibly fast, and seemed to be emitting some kind of energy, as it was easily detectable from such a large distance.

"By the Gods," 'Eranumee said. "Could this be the messenger that the Arbiter spoke of?"

"If messenger means 'big giant missile that's about to burn us a new asshole', then yeah, I guess it is," Johnson said in response.

A missile? No, that's definitely not a missile.

The object was closer now, it seemed to have descended thousands of feet in only a few seconds. Jan put her augmented eyes to use, and straining herself she could see the general outline of the object through the small pair of binoculars.

"It's a person!" Jan exclaimed in shock.

"Say what?" Johnson said, before peering at the object a little closer. "Holy shit, she's right. Did some poor bastard not have his evac chute open up?"

"No Sergeant," 'Eranumee said with conviction. "He is our savior."

Johnson didn't look convinced, but as more and more of the object appeared, Jan was beginning to think that the Elite might be right.

The armor looks a little different, but that is definitely something a Spartan would wear. It's impossible to think, but that has to be the Master Chief!

"Well, where's he going to land?" Johnson asked. "If he's our savior than it'd be nice to know he won't land right on top of our fucking heads."

No sooner had Johnson spoken, when the human clad in the odd armor had slammed into the ground, creating a crater nearly forty meters in diameter. Somehow the soldier had controlled his decent as he had landed, kneeling with one leg, his body low to the ground and looking as if the incredible force of slamming into the ground hadn't effected him in the slightest.

"Shitâ€¦!" Johnson muttered as the figure climbed to his feet, dust and debris from his impact clearing around him.

The strange energy peeling off of him seemed to increase as the figure glanced at his surroundings, and saw that he was situated dead-center between the city of Gestahl, and the Covenant forces

intent on capturing it. Jan couldn't help but shudder as a tendril of fear raced down her spine whilst the cold gaze of the armor-clad creature swept over the battlefield.

"What are they doing?" Jan asked, in regards to the Covenant forces. They had stopped in their approach and were staring at the mysterious soldier.

"Probably deciding who's side that guy is on," Johnson said. "Kinda like we are. Either way, considering he just dropped out of the fucking sky, something tells me he's gonna mess at least one of us over."

"What do you think?" Jan asked 'Eranumee. The Elite turned and nodded solemnly.

"All we can do, is trust in the Arbiter's words. I shall pass the word along that the soldier is not to be fired upon."

As the Elite began to leave the room, Jan returned her attention to outside the window, where the soldier was now making slight gestures while facing the Covenant force.

"He must be talking to them," Johnson said. "Shit, and we can't hear him from over here."

"-ight me my cowardly enemy! I am not an innocent woman, nor a child with whom life has just blessed! Come and I shall give you a death far too merciful than you deserve!" Cyriacus shouted, using the ancient tongue of the Majal.

How unfortunate, my enemies seem to be too shocked to respond to my presence.

Cyriacus adjusted the output levels of his armor, mulling over the influx of energy he had absorbed when he obliterated the Forerunner ship high above the planet in orbit.

If they do not wish to come to me, then perhaps I shall give them reason to.

The crackling energy that swarmed around his form seemed to intensify before suddenly dimming, and became concentrated along both his arms.

_Which force to strike at first? Those situated in the city will be easier to attack as they are confined to the buildings, while these here in the open fields have many opportunities to flee. _

The distant row of alien tanks rumbled with power, and became the focus of Cyriacus' attention.

_The ground forces it is
thenâ€¦|_

"What the hell is he doing?" Johnson asked as he peered through the

pair of binoculars that Jan had handed him. Out in the center of the battlefield, the lone soldier had began to warp the distorted energy that surrounded him, and was now facing the Covenant forces entirely.

"Whatever it is, something tells me it's going to be big," Jan commented off to the side.

No sooner had the words left her mouth when the soldier out in the field suddenly unleashed a hellish shockwave of energy. A pillar of powerful energy, brighter than anything they had ever seen, drove straight down through the center of the Covenant infantry units, throwing the enemy soldiers on the fringes of the attack high into the air. Those in the direct path were not so lucky, as they seemed to disappear entirely within the confines of the amazing display of power.

The pillar of energy finally stopped its furious charge as it slammed into a tightly knit unit of Covenant Wraith Tanks. Wraiths were well known for their heavy shielding and fortification, but in the face of such an attack, they were shredded as if they were constructed of paper. The gravity propulsion drives used to give the Wraith it's ability to hover became overloaded and promptly exploded, raining smoldering wreckage down upon those troops unlucky enough to be close by.

A long moment of awe-like wonder seemed to overcome the battlefield, as the Covenant forces stared at the damage left in the wake of the soldier's attack. Johnson watched the scene unfold, speechless for one of the few moments in his life.

Like a rope pulled too tightly, the silence snapped, and was replaced by a furious rage brought on by the Covenant forces, who unleashed a massive wave of plasma energy towards the lone soldier. Johnson swore every last soldier must have fired their weapons at the soldier.

The intensity of the attack seemed to burn the air itself as the plasma sailed across the open field towards the soldier. In defiance to the coming wave of certain death, the soldier remained rooted in his position, staring back at the Covenant forces with arrogance.

"He's going to be killed!" Jan shouted, and before Johnson had a chance to see what she was doing, the girl had leapt to her feet and was rushing out of the room.

"Jan!" Johnson shouted after her, but she was already too far gone, and after an internal dispute he returned his attention to out the window, where the wave of plasma was just about to envelop the soldier.

"There ain't gonna be nothing left of the poor bastard," he muttered.

In contrast to Johnson's words, the second before the soldier was melted by the attack, he thrust his arms wide, off to his sides, and a brilliant flash of light shot out across the battlefield.

"Shit!" Johnson cursed, throwing his arms up to block out the light. His eyes burned, giant red spots swimming in front of him despite the

knowledge that he had closed his eyes. For a moment he was certain he had gone blind.

By the time he had managed to crawl back to the window, his vision had slightly cleared, granting him a hazy view of the battlefield. The view afforded to him was enough to give the Sergeant enough cause to think that now might be a good idea to get out of the fucking building.

Cyriacus let his armor take the brunt of the Covenant assault, the force of the enemy attack cracking the hardened metal beneath his feet and driving him deeper into the crater. The gigantic wave of plasma had given him nearly tenfold the amount of energy that the shielding on the vessel out in space provided him. It would take a few moments to cultivate and transfer the raw energy, and until then he would be exposed to enemy attack.

The enemy forces were not idle after they launched their volley of plasma energy. The hundreds of thousands of ground troops had begun their charge towards him, intent on ripping apart whatever remained of his body after the plasma energy struck him.

To their credit, the enemy stumbled only slightly after Cyriacus absorbed the plasma volley with an ease that bordered on impossible. Their bloodthirstiness seemed to have overridden the self-preservation instincts all creatures were born with. These creatures were intent on rushing to their deaths, and Cyriacus would be loath to disappoint them.

The armor on his arms shifted, and panels along the length of his forearms opened up, allowing the large pointed blades to be freed on each arm. The blades were attached to his armor, and as such he would be forced into a lightning-quick battle style. He would need to last for several minutes before the energy he absorbed could be processed and filtered, which meant he'd be given a chance to murder his enemies with his own hands.

As a malicious grin spread across his face behind his helmet, Cyriacus felt a pulse of energy through his body. A voice was calling out to him from somewhere, but from where?

"It soundsâ€¦like Chrysanthe."

As if he were struck by some unknown force, Cyriacus lurched forward painfully, his hands coming up to clasp onto his helmet.

Painâ€¦why is there so much pain? I'll avenge you my love, until then wait for me on the other side with my dear Laelia. I know I've made you wait for so long, but I will do my best to reach you.

The computer overlay display that was flashed across his visor alerted Cyriacus and gathered his attention back to the battlefield.

The power necessary to filter so much raw energy is going to disengage the fusion core for several minutes. It looks like I'll be forced to fight without any assistance from the suit.

Jan had reached the bottom floor of the building when she felt the tremendous expenditure of power out on the battlefield, and for one terrifying moment she thought that the Covenant attack had killed the Master Chief. As she rounded the corner and came out onto the road leading out of the city, she saw that the Spartan had somehow survived the attack. Peering closer as she ran, Jan saw that the massive plasma wave hadn't even touched the ground. Whatever the Master Chief had done, he'd made the Covenant assault disappear without a trace.

Her elation over John's survival was short-lived however, when she saw that the legions of Covenant had begun their charge towards the Spartan, looking for all intents and purposes like they were about to rip him to shreds.

Why isn't he running?

Jan had cleared the road and was already running across the hardened surface that covered the entirety of the Covenant planet before she realized that she didn't even have a weapon.

"Damnit!" she cursed and halted her charge momentarily. A glance behind her told the girl enough that if she turned back, by the time she returned the Master Chief would already have been overrun. She was almost three hundred yards away from the Spartan and the looming Covenant army.

With a disgusted grunt, Jan resumed her charge towards the swarming army, ignoring the cries from the mixture of Elite, Hunter, Grunt, and Marine forces behind her. Weapon or no weapon, she was going to help him.

She had hurtled over the last of the roadblocks erected by the Elite warriors and begun sprinting across the upper roadways leading out towards the vector where the battle was looming when she felt the ground begin to tremble. Her eyes focused on the Covenant forces ahead and saw that the many clusters of Wraith tanks had begun to fire on the Master Chief's position, heedless of their own forces that were charging in their intended range. Brute, Drone, and Jackal soldiers were scorched by their own forces as they rushed towards the Spartan.

Leaping down to a lower section of the roadway, Jan saw that the Spartan had shifted his armor, and now two long pointed blades protruded from his arms along his forearms. For the first time since the attack earlier she saw him move, the warrior taking the time to climb over the edge of the crater he had created earlier, giving him the opportunity to regard the incredibly large number of Covenant currently charging towards him.

Run you idiot! Jan raged in her mind as she jumped from the lowest roadway onto the hardened metal ground. She was on level with the soldiers now, and she only had another hundred yards or so before she met up with the Spartan, but already she could tell that the Covenant were going to beat her to the punch.

A small cluster of Marines on a rooftop were overlooked the looming battle with a sense of wonder when they heard Sergeant Johnson approach.

"Goddamn! I thought I told you assholes to get low during that last artillery assault!" the hardened soldier exclaimed as he came to a stop before them.

"Shit, Sarge!" a Marine Corporal said. "We woulda been toast either way. The Covenant ain't gonna take too long to tear through those two."

"Two?" Johnson asked. Without waiting for a response, he reached down and snatched the biped binocular device from the soldier and held it up to his eyes.

"That girl tore outta here not even two minutes ago," the corporal said.

"Why the fuck didn't someone stop her!" Johnson demanded as he locked his view on the girl wearing UNSC fatigues, currently rushing across the metal surface of the city floor towards the armored soldier and a whole shit-load of Covenant.

"Before we blinked she was past all the roadblocks. It woulda been suicide goin' after her. Plus I don't think none of us would manage to catch her."

"Goddamn," Johnson breathed angrily under his breath. Jan was only a couple hundred yards from the soldier, but it looked like whatever assistance she was hoping to lend was going to be too little too late. The Covenant were closing in, and from the glow overwhelming the soldiers in the front ranks, they were about to repeat the previous performance and launch an incredible wave of plasma at the soldier. With a grunt Johnson prepared to cover his eyes when the plasma wave was unleashed.

This time the plasma energy slammed into the ground without a hindrance, surprising Johnson. Even more surprising was that there wasn't any sign of the soldier.

"What the hell?"

Almost thirty of the lead Brutes in the charging Covenant forces fell to the ground, and before they were trampled by the soldiers behind them, Johnson could see that each one had been decapitated.

"What's going on, Sarge?" the Marine corporal asked. "That guy shoulda been roasted alive."

"I think that bastard Arbiter was telling the truth," Johnson said, his tone light. This time he concentrated his eyes through the biped binocular and caught a glimpse of the armored soldier as he seemed to blur across the front line of Covenant forces who were slowing their charge as they realized the enemy was no longer in front of them.

"'Messenger of divinity' huh?" Johnson grinned. He turned and smiled

at the small gathering of Marines.

"Grab your gear boys. That sonofabitch is on our side, and we're going to help him send the Covenant running with their tails between their legs!"

Jan was as surprised as anyone when she saw that the Master Chief hadn't been vaporized by the last Covenant attack. Her suicide charge stumbled to a halt only seventy feet from the Covenant forces, as she watched in amazement as the lead forces of the Covenant assault began to fall, their bodies in a state of disassemble. The Covenant themselves stopped as well, taking up firing positions, but without a target they soon became overwhelmed with confusion and began firing wildly, striking at each other.

Her amazement stalled as she saw several squads of Brutes notice her position and begin to take potshots at her. Ducking down low, Jan avoided the initial barrage but quickly found herself being fired upon by more and more soldiers.

Shit! I'm tied down here and since the Covenant seem to like having as little obstruction as possible, there's nothing to take cover behind. Sooner or later one of those bastards is going to get a lucky hit and I'll be done for.

It appeared that the Brute squads had sent word to several of the Wraith tanks, for shortly after her discovery Jan felt the ground tremble as one of the giant plasma cannon rounds slammed into the steel covered earth only thirty feet from her position.

Her cool resolve quickly melted under the barrage of enemy fire and savage fear took over. Quivering with fright, Jan clenched her eyes shut and shouted the only thing she could think of.

"JOHN!"

The voice cut through the air like a knife, and Cyriacus' head snapped towards where it originated from, his eyes settling on the still form of a young girl crumpled upon the ground. Plasma rounds flew past her position, coming dangerously close to striking her.

His blade sliced through the thick tendons of one of the ugly beasts, knocking it's head clear off its shoulders. The voice echoed in his skull and memories flooded his senses, two names being called out simultaneously.

Jan!

"Chrysanthe!"

At the precise moment the fusion drive of his armor kicked back to life, Cyriacus put himself in motion and sprinted towards the girls position, clearing the large distance in fractions of a second. The armor's shielding absorbed the mongrel's attacks as he knelt down in

front of the girl, a gloved hand coming down to rest on her motionless head.

With a start the girl reared up and backwards, staring at him in fright. The fear seemed to dull as she realized that he was not one of the feral beasts, and Cyriacus looked into her blue eyes as recognition dawned on him.

"Chrysantheâ€|your alive."

The girl stared at him without comprehension, and before he could embrace her, Cyriacus felt a large plasma round slam into his shields. With a mental check he saw that the energy from the earlier attack had finished it's cycle and was now prepared to fire.

"Stay where you are my beloved, I will deal with these beasts first," Cyriacus said, and despite the girl's continued confusion, she seemed to obey the command in his voice and remained on the ground.

Cyriacus regarded the looming enemy army with rage spilling off his form. The blades he had used to rip their flesh asunder slid back into their earlier positions inside his armor as his arms came down to rest by his side.

"Disgusting filth! You took her from me once, but you shall never again be given the opportunity!"

Sergeant Johnson was clearing the last barricade when the first shockwave hit. The force, coupled by the third blinding light to be emitted that day, sent him reeling backwards as he crashed into the Marine forces down below, sending them tumbling back down to ground.

The concussion from the force made his ears ring painfully and he lay on top of one of the unfortunate Marines as he struggled to regain his senses. He slowly climbed back to his feet, helping the other Marines to their feet, and after assurances that they were all right, he set about climbing the final barricade once more.

"If its not one thing its another," he grumbled to himself as he hitched his hand onto the upper frame and hauled his body upwards. Breathing deeply he turned his attention towards the battle, and felt the bottom of his stomach fall out.

Goddamnâ€|

Hellish flames burned across the battlefield. Corpses of Covenant forces lay immobile on the ground as the fire scorched their flesh. Wraith's burned with fury as their fusion drives cooked off and overloaded. The metal ground seemed to have melted, becoming a silver sea of burning fire. The flames distorted his vision, but Johnson swore he couldn't see any of the Covenant forces any longer.

As his mind reeled at the scene before him, a figure appeared in his view and he quickly grabbed for his binoculars.

Standing upon the edge of the enormous crater was the soldier from before. In his arms he cradled Jan close to his body as he overlooked the results of whatever the hell he had done to the Covenant army.

One second she was staring at the Master Chief's back, and the next everything had gone black. An incredible pulse of power slammed into her, and for a moment she was sure her body would be torn apart by the forces pulling against her body. Before she could succumb, an arm looped around her waist and pulled her up against an armored body, and Jan realized it was the Master Chief.

He's protecting meâ€|

Her ears were pained against the shockwave that seemed to originate from the figure that held onto her. Somehow she was not affected by the strike, and she kept her eyes clenched shut while the battle died down around them.

"Yeln si nansu."

The words were foreign to her, and Jan slowly inched her eyes open and found herself staring into the face of the Master Chief. The visor that had covered his face was no longer there, and he smiled at her with a grand look as his arms tightened fractionally around her.

"Thank yâ€|!"

Her response was cut off as the Spartan leant forward, capturing her lips with his own. Jan felt her mind shut down as the Master Chief lightly teased her bottom lip with his own. When she felt his tongue press lightly against her mouth, her mind kicked back into gear and she pulled away from him, aware that her cheeks must have been burning furiously.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jan demanded vehemently, his response more important to her than the fact that she now stood amidst a sea of flames and unmoving Covenant bodies.

The Master Chief looked at her in confusion. He spoke another phrase in whatever incomprehensible language he had spouted before.

"John, what's wrong with you?" Jan asked, her voice considerably gentler than before.

His eyes seemed to come afire when she spoke his name, and his face twisted into a grimace as he dropped her to the small section of metal ground that had not been ripped apart during the battle. She hit hard against her tail bone, and she looked up in surprise as the Master Chief fell to his knees, his hands clutching at his head as he slammed his head against the ground repeatedly.

"Nasire lenâ€|where am Iâ€|fisil deokaâ€|help meâ€|!"

What's going on?

The powerful roar of an engine drew Jan's attention upwards, and she

saw a Pelican hovering above them. Slowly the ship began to descend, and she could see Sergeant Johnson leaning out the back, peering down at them.

"How's our boy doing?" Johnson called down. Jan looked down at the Master Chief, and saw that he was now motionless on the ground.

"He's unconscious, I think!" Jan shouted back. Johnson disappeared from view for a moment, and the ship quickly dropped down the remaining distance, stopping at a hover only a few feet from the ground. Johnson jumped from the back down to the ground, landing beside the two.

"Let's get him aboard," Johnson said, his arms gripping the lower sections of the Spartan's legs. Jan hurried to her feet and hooked her arms behind his shoulders. With a great deal of effort the two managed to lift the Spartan off the ground and dump him into the Pelican bay.

As soon as Jan and Sergeant Johnson climbed aboard, the Pelican lifted away from the ground and started back towards the city of Gestahl. Jan glanced backwards, and saw the true extent of whatever the Master Chief had done.

The entire metal plate that the Covenant army were positioned upon was now nothing but scorched earth or burning flames. Try as she might, she couldn't see any of the Covenant forces moving about.

"They're all dead," Johnson commented from beside her. Jan turned and regarded him with a look of surprise. The Sergeant nodded softly.

"When you see the video the Pelicans managed to get, you'll understand."

Jan felt the adrenalin high she had been on since the start of the battle more than ten hours ago start to wear off. Her energy seemed to drain out of her in an instant, and she slumped against her seat, trying to get the memory of the Master Chief as he was crumpled on the ground screaming incoherently as he slammed his head into the hardened metal. Her last thought before she dozed off was something she wished to express vocally.

_What the hell is going
on?_

****Author's Notes:** I'm sure that's something you guys are asking as well huh?******

****Big chapter, like I said before, not as big as it was going to be, which is pretty nuts. I've had quite a few computer set backs lately so now that they've more or less sorted themselves out I think I can stop these damned month-long waits. At least I hope I can, cause a month from now is that little thing I like to call the Xbox 360 launch. I'll be pretty useless after that.****

****Some of you are probably thinking I've reneged on that whole no romance thing right? Don't worry, that right there was the only bit you're getting from me. I think so at least.****

****If your wondering about what's happening to the Master Chief, well, take to heart that your probably not the only one. Those familiar with my other work know that I enjoy wrecking havoc with the minds of my characters, and I really wouldn't take any bets that this story is going to be different.****

****Thanks for reading and reviewing, you guys are too nice for your own good.****

24. The End of a War Side Story

****Author's Notes: Small side-story for everyone while I get back on track. After a multitude of problems (family emergencies, too many hospital visits for myself, a very stressful holiday period) I'm finally somewhat back in the swing of things around here, so here's hoping that I can get started on the next real chapter. In the meantime, enjoy this close, personal look at Sergeant Johnson.****

****This is indeed integral to the overall story, as its basically a deleted scene so to speak, from Chapter 22. More from me belowâ€¦(apologies for the very forceful language in this chapter, but its to be expected from soldiers, right?)****

****This story takes place after the Lewis Puller arrives at Danrun, and before the Master Chief/Cyriacus arrives on the planet.

'_The End of a War' Side Story**_**

****The Defense of Gestahl****

****Air Space, Danrun - Approximately 200 Miles from Gestahl****

****7 December, 2552****

****37:43 (Covenant Planet Danrun Daily Cycles Integrated)****

My head was swimming as we pulled through the zero gee bank, the Pelican rumbling like my old '23 Fogol Cruiser. That little bitch knew how to roar when she wanted to, but with a little effort on my part, she could purr like the contented beast that I knew she was. The memory of that car, my first car when I was only sixteen years old, was a lifetime ago, when everything was simpler.

Back then my ambitions were usually involved with nothing more than drinking and laughing it up with my boys back at school. Grades and schoolworkâ€¦that shit never had much to do with me, and I was glad to reciprocate, keeping my distance from anything that might further my education. The only reason I kept up appearance by going to school was for my mother. She wanted me to have a good life, not the dreary existence everyone else around me seemed to have and desire. Busting her ass every day, working just to put food on the table and pay the fees necessary to keep living in the corrupt world we existed in. Guilt was what it was. I couldn't look her in the eyes and tell her I

had no intention of going to college or university, that woulda been nothing more than a slap to the face. I probably would have earned a couple myself. She was a loving mother, but when the time came she could tear into someone like a rabid dog.

I wonder what she felt when the Covenant came and destroyed her home. Her life. Erasing everything that was left, as if her whole life was nothing more than a smudge that could be erased.

Shit. I'm doing it again. I keep losing myself, and I can't keep hating these Covenant bastards, not when I'm only a few minutes away from coming to their aid. Remembering how much they've taken from me is not the best way to start a rescue mission.

Rescue mission? I can't believe that's what Captain Keyes is calling this. Suicide mission sounds a bit better. The Covenant outnumber us three times over, and I can only imagine how much they're itching to start pounding on the Elites.

"Hey Sarge! You wool-gathering over there or something?"

Private Pearson, a Marine out of the Capula System. His family fled before the Covenant arrived, and were lucky enough to get Green Cards letting them onto Earth. The mouthy little bastard probably had it in for the Covenant by then, and wanted to win the war on his own, thus the speedy application to the UNSC.

The kid woulda been better off staying with his folks, living out however long humanity had in a state of ignorant peace. That way he could die without any regrets.

"Private, if I should ever appear to be 'wool-gathering' that means you stay the hell out of my way, and since I'm such a nice guy, I shall indulge your general fund of knowledge. When I put on my 'wool-gathering' face, that means I'm in a shit-kicking mood, and usually, the first thing to catch my attention is who gets the shit kicked out of them first. Now are you sure that asking me such a dumb fucking question is the right thing to do?"

My face is twisted into what I'm betting was a scowl. Why couldn't this little idiot let me have a few more minutes of peace? I've spent over half my life protecting and fighting, so why the hell can't I get more than a few minutes peace?

"Pearson you dumb shit!" another Marine spoke, and I recognized the southern drawl. It was Corporal Walle. "Sarge ain't about to get caught unaware, and he especially ain't about to let some wet-behind-the-ears Private tell him off."

"No need to get defensive, Walle!" Private Pearson retorted over the thrum of the Pelican's engines. My attention diverted from the two Marines and out the small window giving me a vantage point towards the action outside. We'd drifted into the upper portions of the planet by the looks of it. Things were about to get bumpy.

"You mind telling me what we're doing in this chickenshit mission Sarge?" Pearson demanded. Obviously he had tired of arguing with Corporal Walle. A sigh escaped me as I was dragged back into the verbal sparring match.

"Private Pearson, you were present when Captain Keyes gave the debriefing. The Covenant stand to overtake a sizable portion of the ex-Covenant defensive sphere, and we're going in to help them hold the line," I explained. I put conviction in my tone, making it appear that I felt what we were doing was necessary. Inside, I'm not sure what I would have said given the choice. Regardless, Captain Keyes gave the order, and it was our job to get the mission done.

"Bullshit," Pearson remarked bitterly. "We spend the last few decades fightin' these pieces of shit, only to turn around on a goddamn dime and start pulling their asses out of the fire when it gets a little too hot for them? What the fuck are we doing?"

"Stow the whining Private," Corporal Walle interjected before I had the chance. I'm glad he did, I don't think my response would have been as convincing.

"Are you saying I don't have a point?" Pearson asked intently, I didn't like the way the other soldiers seemed to be hanging onto his every word.

"Why the hell do I gotta put my ass on the line to save a bunch of alien freaks? Just because the big bad Prophets decide they don't like the way they been stinking up the place, doesn't mean they suddenly earn sympathy points from me. If you ask me we should just sit back and let these alien fuckers kill each other off."

"Nobody asked you Private," I responded, aware that my tone was anything but strong.

"Shit Sarge! Even you have to think we'd be better off back on Earth! We're out here helping out some aliens that wanted to see us extinct not event two months ago, and while we're here, our families back on Earth are getting turned into fucking freaks of nature. You tell me! Where would we be better off fighting?"

Aside from Corporal Walle, I could tell everyone was agreeing with what Pearson was spurring out non-stop. Somewhere deep down I'm sure even I agreed with him on some level.

But that didn't mean he was rightâ€|

"Heh, so you think we should head back home huh?" I asked, the calm I was exuding surprising even me. Seated as I was, I could barely make eye contact with Pearson from where he was strapped in.

"Let me ask you, Private. How long do you think it would take before the Covenant came looking for us again? A few months? Maybe even a year? It won't matter how long they take, because that first trip they took was only the opening act. If the Elites can't beat the Covenant back into submission, you're going to see what its like to be on the receiving end of the strongest fucking force this universe has to offer. Earth will be a smoldering rock by the time the Covenant are finished. You won't even get to fire your gun. One minute they'll be here, and the nextâ€|nothing."

"You want to turn back and fucking run away to Earth, you go ahead and petition the Captain to do it. And when she tells you that your mission is to be here, you can walk away thankful, because she just

saved you from experiencing something worse then death."

Memories crash through me. The feel of the sharp pincer as it pierced my neck, and the horror as something began moving inside of me, tearing away at my body like a scavenger. The desire to scream, my blood burning as I lost control of my body. The only thing I can do is scream ,but by then I couldn't remember how.

"Nobody can go against the Flood and survive. There's only been one sonofabitch lucky enough to fight the bastards head on and still walk away, and right now he ain't around to help."

Silence. Combat boots shuffling against the metal deck are drowned out by the engines. I chewed Private Pearson out not because he was getting on my nerves, it was mainly because he was voicing things that shouldn't be said, not right before we set out to fight a battle where I'm sure none of these men will come back alive from. Doubts before war will always occur, but to have them voiced, to have those sentiments shared by those around you, it means there's weight behind your thoughts. Those things can crush a soldier in the heat of battle, and I don't want to see anyone else die needless deaths.

"Its your choice Pearson. You can do everything possible in a wasteful effort to get back to Earth, where you'll die and become food for the Flood. Or you can shut that trap of yours and get ready for the battle, because it sure as hell isn't going to wait around for you."

A mumbled apology is all I get in response from the soldier, his eyes downcast and focused on the rough surface of his boots. Shit, now I'm starting to feel bad. These men need to think of me as their leader, but I'd rather I didn't have to smack them around to get the message across.

Outside the small window I can see the battlefield now. The Covenant force was incredible. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, vehicles, and other weapons of war were out along the incredible expanse of open space that lay before the city of Gestahl. Immeasurable amounts of firepower streamed towards the city limits, crushing buildings and soldiers alike. The Covenant were unleashing an artillery barrage unlike anything I'd seen before. The Elites in Gestahl weren't defenseless, but their retaliatory attacks were unfocused and typically fell short of their targets. The forces in Gestahl were at a disadvantage when conducting these tactics. Outside of the major populate cities on the planet, the Covenant had glassed and covered the ground with a sturdy metal surface, eliminating any targets that the Elites might be able to use to zero in on the Covenant forces.

Unfortunately for the soldiers in the city, the Covenant had more than enough targets. Judging from the smoke and fire streaming from the city, the Covenant were driving that point home as hard as possible.

The Pelican began to accelerate, the thrum of the engines becoming a heavy roar as we broke into a heavy dive. It wasn't going to take long for the Covenant to realize where we were, and when they did, we were going to be on the receiving end of their attacks. One hit from their plasma cannons would be enough to wipe out a Pelican and anyone

unfortunate enough to be inside.

"We're going in hot boys, keep your heads upâ€|but not too far up."

A poor attempt at humor to lighten the situation, and judging from the nervous chuckles that arose from my comment, the others knew it too. They laughed because the alternative was going back to the darkness inside of them, and right now anyone would gladly take an extended hand to pull them from that abyss.

Looking from face to face, I realized I was the most senior soldier aboard. Adding up the service of every other soldier would still leave them a few years short from matching my own time served. An old war dog, that's what I was to these kids. Some dumb sonofabitch that hasn't realized how lucky he is to have survived for so long.

Lucky? How could anyone call this lucky?

Against my will I started fingering the intricate metal along my artificial limb. A sharp crackle of static blasted through my com link, signaling that someone was about to speak.

"Things are getting rough out there, so make sure you sit tight and don't wander about."

It was the pilot of our Pelican, Lieutenant Elisa Deniz. A short woman with a temper that could only be described with wild gestures and panicked looks. She knew how to hold her own against anything that might cross her path, and I respected her all the more for it.

I suppose the sudden silence should have tipped me off, but when it happened I was still knocked for a loop. One second I was fingering the knots on my harness, and the next, the entire front half of the Pelican was gone. A surreal moment followed, where the remnants of our ship coasted for a few moments after the plasma cannon round wiped out Lieutenant Deniz and her copilot. I couldn't remember his name for some reason, and on reflection, I guess it was a stupid fucking thing to wonder about at the time.

Inertia finally took over and we began to plummet towards the ground at a speed I didn't even want to guess. The wind screamed around us, filling the empty void as every soldier had their voices stolen from the terror coursing through their veins. Despite the urge to clench my eyes shut and wait for the inevitable crash, I twisted my head to gaze out the now wide open front end of our ship. We were falling at an angle, coasting almost. I had only a few seconds to realize that we'd probably hit the ground only a few hundred meters from the city before there was a sickening sound of metal being crushed as we struck the reinforced metallic earth that seemed to cover the entirety of the planet.

Mercifully my eyes finally closed, sparing me the sight of PFC Frank Miller as the section of wall behind him suddenly tore free and crumpled like a sheet of paper. The boy's screams of terror were lost as he was encapsulated within a metal tomb, the sickening crush of flesh and bone assaulting my ears as I was savagely rocked in my seat. The force of our initial impact was enough to steal the breaths of every man aboard, and I sat in silence as the ship began to tumble

and slide across the ground, sparks kicking up and our metallic shelter being torn away.

There seemed to be a grand pause before I realized that we'd stopped, and surprisingly I appeared to have survived without any injuries (not that such a thing would bother me anymore). Around me came the cries and groans of the others, and I was at once pleased and saddened to hear them. I would rather that they had all died than to survive whilst being mortally injured. The trip to Gestahl was one-way, and we wouldn't be getting a lift back to the Lewis Puller until the Covenant either overran us and the survivors somehow contacted the ship, or we beat back the Covenant. There wasn't going to be time to look after any wounded, evidenced as much to the fact that we didn't even have a medic with our platoon.

"Sound off! How many of you are alive?" I bellowed, trying to unhinge myself from the straps that likely saved my life during our decent and impact.

One by one I received acknowledgments from the remaining soldiers. PFC Miller, PFC Cortez, and Corporal Walle failed to respond. I knew what happened to Miller, but not the other two and I could feel something heavy settle in the pit of my stomach. Opening small slits allowing me to see, I caught a my first glimpse of what remained.

The entire roof of the Pelican had been sheered away, angry tears that bent the metal down to face us. The outstretched hand of a demon, coming to claim the lives of those that still lived. It was a miracle that so many of us survived. The Pelican must have hit the ground at an angle sharp enough to keep the fuel reserves from detonating and finishing what the impact hadn't accomplished.

PFC Cortez was the first body I spotted. He was still strapped into his jump seat, and it wasn't until I saw the unnatural bend in his neck that I realized he was dead, and not just unconscious. The shock from the impact must have caused Cortez's neck to snap under the strain. It wasn't a clean way to die, but as my eyes settled on Corporal Walle, I realized there were far worse ways to go.

Walle had been unfortunate enough to be sitting next to PFC Miller, and was nearly caught in the same metal tomb that housed Miller. Instead, the metal that had crumpled and was shorn away did not crush Corporal Walle—it impaled him. Protruding from his chest was a section of the outer Pelican skin that had somehow cracked through the interior, and ended up cutting right through Walle. His chest was rising and falling slightly, so he was still alive at least, but judging from the position of the metal shrapnel, he'd be gone before anything could be done. I wasn't an experienced medic by any means, the most I could do was simple dressings for wounds, and maybe lend a shoulder or an arm to help a wounded soldier off the battlefield. Without a surgeon nearby, Walle was as good as dead.

An explosion erupted nearby, reminding me just how we wound up in this predicament, and I gave up struggling with the clasps holding me in place, settling for cutting the straps away with my knife. My body seemed to protest the sudden weight placed upon it, but I pushed the angry protests aside and began cutting the others free. Private Pearson was no longer quite as talkative, as he couldn't take his eyes off the bodies of Corporal Walle and PFC Cortez.

With the last Marine free, I stepped carefully to the large tear where the cockpit used to be, and took a quick scan of our surroundings. Not surprisingly, we came to a stop close to the city limits of Gestahl, and judging from the lack of plasma fire coming from the buildings that loomed a scant few hundred feet away, we were at the lone section of the city that wasn't quite under siege just yet. As ridiculous as it sounded, luck was still on our side.

"Sarge, Corporal Walle's still alive," Private Pearson said. Gone was the obnoxious tone from before, and in its place came a voice that I would have thought came from a frightened child. One who had looked deep within the darkness around him, and saw that there was indeed something awaiting him.

"Grab what's left of your gear," I ordered, ignoring Pearson. I'd be taking care of Walle myself, but I didn't want the others to see. They were too green to understand what I was going to do. "We'll need to get into the city fast, because if the Covenant just happen to be watching us, I wouldn't put it past them to use us as target practice."

The others numbly grabbed what little they could find; aside from one or two Marines, everyone else had lost their weapon during our tumultuous decent and crash, myself included. All that remained was my knife, and an M6-C handgun that managed to stay within its holster at my side.

Once the others were assembled, I directed their attention to exactly where our destination was. A small slit in between two enormous skyscrapers that looked to have been unmolested so far from artillery fire. I was about to give the order to move out when Pearson tugged at the corner of my flak jacket.

"Sarge, what about Walle? We gotta do something for him."

"I'll handle it Private," I explained, careful to keep my tone soft. "When I give the word, I want you to haul ass with the others, and don't stop until your inside the city. You got that?"

Whether it was shell-shock from the crash, or just maybe he'd finally learned to shut up and do what he was told, Pearson nodded his assent and walked to the edge of the Pelican.

"Go, go, go!" I shouted, and with little hesitation the remaining Marines were off, sprinting as best as their injured bodies could allow. Without watching, I turned back around and walked quickly over to where Corporal Walle was still slumped forward, the foreign piece of metal still lodged through his chest. His breathing had slowed considerably, but left as he was, he could survive another couple of hours.

The handgun was in my grip before I knew it, and with little flourish I place the muzzle against his temple. A lone round was chambered and ready to steal his life.

This wouldn't be the first time I provided this service to a dying soldier. I wish I could lose count, forget their faces, but every moment stayed with me, burned into my memory as if their deaths were

my own. Bloodied and weak, those men had faced excruciating deaths, and I took on the role of Death, delivering unto them the embrace of darkness. There existed no doubt within me that when I finally died, all of my sins would be visited upon me if indeed there was such a thing as an afterlife. A service it may be in my eyes, but beneath the mighty weight of the universe, what I was doing was nothing more than murder. I took these soldier's lives before they had a chance to run out on their own. Stealing what is most precious to any living thing.

Inside Corporal Walle's jacket, I caught sight of something, and with intense interest, I pulled a small holo-card from his front pocket. With my touch, the image of a woman appeared, laughing with a smile in her eyes that spoke volumes of an innocence I felt I hadn't seen in a lifetime. She was obviously Walle's girlfriend, someone that likely reminded him of why he was fighting, and for what reason he just might lose his life in this war.

Was she still alive? Perhaps she was on one of the outer colonies that the Covenant already glassed. Maybe Walle joined the UNSC to avenge her, winning the war with her memory, like so many of these children did. Naivety strong enough that they forgot what little words they may have heard from those that had at one time or another experienced the savagery that is this war.

I wonder how long it took Walle to realize how fleeting those emotions were. War could take the best intentions and turn them against a person. Breaking a man's spirit was nothing, and destroying his dreams was as easy as one carefully aimed strike.

"You keep her with you Walle," I said breaking the solemn silence, tucking the holo-card back into his jacket. "I wouldn't want you to be lonely."

For some reason the trigger was immobile now, like it was frozen in place. I tried again and again to fire and end Walle's suffering, but the result was the same, the muzzle stayed where it was, ready and waiting to deliver his freedom. I was hesitating, I knew that much at least. My conscience was telling me that I should leave him be, and give him the chance to enjoy those final moments of life, grasping and remembering whatever memories he might wish to relive. How many of them involved the girl he kept close to his heart?

A wheezing breath escaped the dying soldier, and I watched with morbid fascination as his arm rose up and wavered in the air. His hand clutched weakly at my jacket, and as I felt my throat compress, his lips moved in a rasping wheeze. What he said I will never know, and I think I am glad to have missed them.

Did he wail against the injustice of this war? Questioning humanity's sin to deserve so cruel a fate, or was he crying out for help, wondering why no one came to his aid as he slowly died? With his eyes glazed, and casting his last breath did he call out for his mother? So much like all men do when faced with their deaths, did Walle desire to return to the one who birthed him? And into whose arms he would find the comfort and love that only a mother could provide? Would he cry out from that warmth and love, weeping as he felt his pain slip away and be replaced with only the care his mother could provide? That simple primal urge, to give into the maternal love of a mother.

I can't say for sure what he may have said, but what I did know was Walle had only one more step left before he could find eternal rest.

The trigger was no longer heavy, and as I swallowed against the lump that seemed to be lodged in my throat, I delivered the ending to his life. No longer did his chest struggle endlessly against the creeping signs of death, and the weak hand that gripped my jacket was now limp alongside the remains of his jump seat. He was dead.

There are many instances over the years where I can remember hearing people say how life is the most important gift given to us. I'm not really sure what they meant by that, but I guess I kind of understood a little, at least a little bit. Whether or not there is something waiting at the end of someone's life, the experience of that life is the most important thing to a person, and at times those lives are cut almost tragically short. Death serves as a looming shadow, a constant reminder that we are mortal in the eyes of this universe and we cannot fight against fate.

Blood was pooling down the side of Walle's head, and I quickly brushed it aside with the hand that took his life. I became mesmerized by it, and after a time the blood dried against my palm, creating a stain that all the water in the world would never wash away. The rough feeling on my hand was only temporary, but the image wasn't going to leave me for a long time. Perhaps not until the day when I was the one on the receiving end of such a merciful action, like the one I bestowed upon Walle as he slowly died.

Yes, life was a valuable gift, but death was the most precious. Life was a dream made up of happiness embittered by sadness, pleasure tainted by pain. Those fleeting moments of joy and delight, over-shadowed by all of our grief, horror, humiliation, and despair. A long life was a horrible curse upon a human, and that all humans strive to achieve it must have been a running joke amongst all that is divine. Death is the antithesis of life. Death is short, death is sweet, death heals every last pain a person experiences and leaves blissful silence in it's place. When a man can no longer endure life and existence, death comes to set him free.

I holstered my handgun, and with great care I pulled Walle free from his impalement, and placed his body on the ground alongside PFC Cortez. It was a terrible crime to leave these men behind, but I was left with no choice; nothing could be done but pray they somehow avoided whatever the outcomes of this battle, so that when it ended their bodies could be found and laid to rest in a manner befitting their great deeds.

Plasma rounds began to fall nearby, causing the Pelican remains to tremble, reminding me that there was still more work to be done. I spared one last glance at the two bodies, then quickly stepped free of the metal tomb and began sprinting across the metallic earth towards the city. Corporal Walle was dead, and I the one who killed him. The burden upon my shoulders was now heavier than before, but in the end it was only one more death on my conscience.

My breaths came quick and short as I ran, the combat boots that adorned my feet clanking as each step fell. It seemed an absurdity, that I would be bereft of all the woes of war at this moment, rushing

away from salvation and instead heading directly into a city of shadows that promised death to all who may dwell within. Inclining my head and twisting shortly I could see the Covenant war machine, specters against the bleeding light that remained from the distant star that provided the planet with its main source of light. Every few moments that silhouette was broken, as the large plasma conduits inside the mighty mobile plasma cannons fired round after round into this city I ran towards. Weak retorts responded from this cavernous city, the futile struggles from a dying creature. That last, trembling hand as it clutched to something that might save it, or finally set it free from this pain.

Like the soldiers that I left, I passed the chasm between the tomb of three men and this beguiled city without any threat of my life being taken. I was unseen, or maybe the Covenant did not find one lone life worth taking at this moment. If it was indeed the latter, I would give them as many moments as possible to regret it over the course of this coming battle. It seemed as if I was placing a sense of finality on whatever the outcome was going to be. Death or life? Was there any other option?

"Sarge!"

Pearson's voice cut straight down to my bones, and I stumbled to a stop, bent over, my haggard breaths the only response I could muster as I became aware that the other soldiers had been waiting for me. I'd entered the city without even taking notice.

"Are you all right?" Corporal Weir asked. He was a middle-aged man from somewhere on Earth. He was at least thirty pounds out of shape, and as I struggled to regain my breath I had to wonder how he managed to run from the Pelican to the city without succumbing to a heart attack.

"I'mâ€¦fine."

Unfortunately my opinion was not very convincing, as I felt Weir wrap his burly arms around my shoulders and cart me off to lean against one of the nearby Covenant skyscrapers.

"What happened to Walle?"

Pearson again. The boy was intent on hounding me at every moment when I wanted a little time to myself. He must hold some kind of grudge against me. Maybe he resents the fact that I've managed to survive this long, I'm sure to those that have lost something in this war, old dogs like myself can be resented easily.

There's too much goddamn hate in this war.

"He's dead, I left him with Cortez," shortly I responded, my words clipped, not because of the fatigue soaking my entire being. "Have any of you attempted to contact the other platoons? I'd imagine at least a couple of them made it into the city all right."

"No sir," Weir replied. "We weren't sure if we should wait for you or not."

I wanted to correct him. I'm not a 'Sir', I'm a Sergeant. I don't warrant that title.

"Its fine," I replied, but I wasn't sure who I was speaking to, Weir or myself. I opened up the com linkup, and set my outgoing message to reach the entire battle net. Humans or Covenant alike, they would all hear it.

"This is Sergeant Avery Johnson, UNSC. Any UNSC or friendly forces within the vicinity please respond."

Silence greeted me, and the other soldiers shuffled uncomfortably.

"I repeat, this is Sergeant Avery Johnson, UNSC. My platoon and I have been separated from the main relief force and are in need of assistance. Any friendly forces near our location please respond."

This time, the response was almost instantaneous.

"We have received your signal Sergeant, please triangulate our signal with the surveillance systems aboard the ship, _Ignoble Hierarchy_. Once configured, follow the signal to our position and we shall link you back up with your relief force."

The deep voice belonged to an Elite, much to my surprise. His gravel tone and deep voice gave him away, even without the odd accent to his words.

"Who am I speaking to?" I asked stupidly. There was a hesitation on the Elite's end, as if he was as surprised at my stupidity as I was.

"This is Lan 'Eranumee, Sergeant Johnson. I am a Sangheili, and I am loath to give away so much information over a communications channel, no matter how secure it might appear to be. Now, if you will please follow my instructions, you can link up with the rest of your relief forces that made it into the city. I shall warn you now, the Covenant have been moving forces into this city, through the blind spots created by our defenses. You must move quickly."

Great. The Elites must have been in worse shape than I thought; if they couldn't even shore up the defenses around the city, enough so that the Covenant couldn't slip in without being noticed. They must really need our forces, I don't think I've ever heard an Elite act so courteously.

We weren't much of a relief force however. Seven soldiers, including myself, bruised and battered from dropping out of the sky. Weaponless for the most part, aside from a handgun and a couple assault rifles. We weren't prepared to reinforce a fucking Boy Scout troupe, let alone a beleaguered army fighting against a superior enemy. Even if every other Pelican made it into the city unharmed, at most we were bringing in maybe a thousand or so troops. Barely enough to cover a quarter mile of territory in this crowded city. Barring a miracle, holding onto this city would be impossible.

"We're in a bad way here," I explained to the Elite. "Our Pelican was shot down and we lost several soldiers, along with most of our weapons."

"Ah!" Surprise tinted the Elite's voice. "You are from the human vessel that crashed only a short while ago? I am quite surprised any of you survived. It would seem you are closer to myself and my fellow warriors than I thought. Triangulating the signals will be pointless. To the west of your location, along the city limit, if you can manage to follow the path a squad of Elites shall find you."

"Understood," I replied, cutting the transmission and climbing to my feet. The conversation was overheard by the others, saving me the task of explaining what was said.

Issuing orders, I put Pearson on point, with me following up the rear. The other soldiers were spaced through the middle, two soldiers against the left side of the street, with the three others on the right. We were going to move fast, but with the threat of Covenant in our vicinity, if we weren't careful we'd be wiped out before the Elites could find us.

My handgun was drawn, held within my right hand, while my left carried the combat knife. I kept the two weapons close together, holding the handgun with both hands in a classic Weaver stance, while the knife was pointed downwards, the handle alongside the butt of the gun. I wasn't going to be of much use should we get into a gunfight, but that wasn't likely to occur. The Covenant streets were narrow, no more than twenty feet wide. Buildings lined the twisted street, creating ample cover should we get ambushed. Should we encounter enemy forces, we'd likely be forced into close quarters and in that situation I would be able to give the enemy a run for their money.

Pearson and Weir were the only other two soldiers that had a weapon, Pearson carrying a BR55 standard issue rifle. It would prove vital should we find a Covenant patrol before they locate us. Weir on the other hand was packing a weapon that I wasn't too experienced with, aside from the initial F3 (Firing-For-Familiarity) during my time served back on Reach, when they brought old dogs like me in to test out whatever the weapons specialists had been cooking up.

It was a variant of the old standard MA5B Assault Rifle. It was what the techies called a "Hybrid" weapon; basically they had taken two existing weapons and just thrown them together hoping that they'd work well as a team. During the F3 exercise the chief addition I noticed was the use of a second barrel, used to fire a 30mm Compact Grenade, which was quickly nicknamed the "Little-Boy" by the other Master Sergeants and myself. It was one of the smaller Assault Rifle-assisted grenades, but it packed a punch like you wouldn't believe. The "Little-Boy" could punch a hole through the reinforced titanium plating on a Scorpion tank from over ten feet away. On enemy soldiers, it basically tore them to shreds. Another addition, was that the barrel was filed down, changing the standard M-118 7.62x51mm FMJ-AP rounds and introducing a prototype 9.32x65mm FMJ-AP round. The reason they were prototypes was because the techs back on Reach were using some kind of Covenant technology in them. Something adapted from the Plasma Pistol that the smaller Covenant would use in combat. We weren't let in on all the specifics, but I think I could tell what the techies were going for when I saw what the prototypes would do to the resultant enemy forces. The MA5B would typically pack "shredder" rounds, which worked well when you were fighting an enemy that didn't have a fucking energy shield, but in the instance of fighting Elites, you would typically have to drain an entire sixty-round clip before

the Elite would go down. What these new prototype rounds did was basically blow right through the fucking shielding, and strike the enemy behind the shield.

Or at least that's what the techs told us they would do. Unfortunately they didn't quite live up to that description as we soon found out. Whatever it was that the techs did to those prototype rounds, they created the first fucking weapon that was probably more dangerous to the person firing than the enemy being fired at. Two Master Sergeants I knew from the 23rd Infantry Div were nearly killed when the first bursts they fired at two stationary enemy "targets" with an actual Covenant energy shield in place, quickly ricocheted off the shield and then somehow zeroed back in on them. The rounds had some kind of Covie technology in them, and it tore through their vests like they were made of rice paper.

After that, the M5A4 (as it was officially called) was quickly recalled. When I saw Weir carrying the damn thing, the first time I'd seen it in almost five years, I did a double-take. I cautioned him at the time, making sure to get the point across that under no circumstances was he to fire the calibrated rounds into any form of Covenant energy shielding. He was big enough to lug the weapon around without getting exhausted, but I'm not sure how well he'd perform under fire. When an enemy is taking pot shots at you and your unarmed teammates, the natural instinct would be to blow the motherfucker away, but in Weir's case, that'd be like signing his death warrant. The Brutes and Drones were open season, but I told him if I caught him taking aim at any Jackals using their personal energy shields, I'd stick my knife right up his ass.

Of course it wasn't the Jackals I should have been worried about, as I was soon to find out.

We'd barely gone half a mile when Pearson signaled for the platoon to hold up. After checking our six and making sure the others were squared away in defensive positions, I made my way up the line to where Pearson was squatting. We were in a narrow section of the street, a series of tall buildings surrounded us (a part of me wondered exactly what the Covenant did in these buildings), and a multitude of alleyways gave plenty of access points for an enemy ambush.

"You better have a good reason for stopping here Pearson," I warned as I neared. The little bastard had the gall to shush me and quickly motioned for me to crouch down near him. I did so, and then raised an eyebrow as he looked at me expectantly.

"Can you hear it?" he asked, keeping his voice low as if he expected something to be waiting around the corner.

"The only thing I can hear is the echo that comes outta your fucking head every time you talk. If your hearing things Pearson, I'll throw Weir up on point and you can guard the others. We can't just sit around and wait for the Covenant to find us. The Elites don't usually issue warnings without there being a bit of weight behind them."

"Sarge I ain't bullshitting you here. I heard something!"

The kid was pretty intent on it, and I quickly wondered if he might

be right. Unconsciously my finger slipped out of the trigger guard of my handgun as I focused myself and tried my best to listen intently to everything around me. Almost immediately I could sense something, almost feeling the vibrations before my ears detected them. A low rumble, and it seemed to be originating from the building that Pearson and I were currently kneeling next to.

"You see, I told you I heard something," Pearson remarked proudly as he stared at me.

"What the hell is it?" I wondered aloud. "It almost sounds like some kind of animal. A growl or something."

Pearson's reply was lost to me, as all of a sudden the growl intensified and from two stories above us, the window plating alongside the building shattered as the biggest thing I ever fucking saw jumped through it and down onto the street we were currently inhabiting. Even as the glass rained down around me I was locked into some kind of stupefied shock, capable of nothing more than staring listlessly at the creature as it bounded off its initial landing on the ground, swiping menacingly in my direction.

My first thought was that the thing put the Hunters to shame when it came to sheer size. It stood on four powerful looking legs, thickly toned muscles twitching and shifting as it growled and swiped a massive clawed paw at the ground. The reinforced metal seemed to part like it was constructed of pliable dough beneath the beast's assault. From where I knelt, I was barely as high as the thing's thighs on each leg. It was as tall as an Elite, and probably as long as two Hunters laying face down. It was hairless, which didn't help improve the absolutely menacing appearance its snarling and growling face lent it. All in all, after staring at the thing for about fifteen seconds, the one concrete thing I knew was that we were probably about to be eaten.

I couldn't see them, but I knew the other soldiers were in a frozen state, much like my own. We waited in absolute stillness, hoping that whatever this thing was, it would overlook our immobile forms and go look for more active prey. Whether that would have happened, I can't say, because the illusion of harmlessness I was hoping to get across was quickly shattered when Pearson fired off a quick three-round burst with his BR55. I would have smacked the idiot if my heart wasn't already inside my throat, and if my limbs hadn't felt like they were made of titanium.

If Pearson's shots actually hit the creature I couldn't tell, but even if they did it certainly didn't look like they did anything other than piss the thing off even more than it was. More menacing growls came from the beast, and it began to work its powerful looking jaw, snapping in my general direction but I think it was likely more interested in Pearson.

"You dumb shit," I said slowly, aware that my voice was trembling. Pearson looked at me in surprise, but judging from the way his hands were shaking, he was as scared shitless as I was.

"Sarge I hit that thing for sure," Pearson hissed. "It didn't even fucking blink!"

The thing had given up trying to intimidate us with growls, and not

grew silent as it began to slowly stalk towards us, but for some reason I felt my last moments in this universe needed to be spent talking with Pearson instead of making an effort to at least run away. Its lumbering gait was slow and purposeful, as if it knew that even if we ran, it'd take no more than a leap and a bound to catch us. No more than ten yards separated Pearson and I from the beast.

A rhythmic clacking noise off to the side caught my attention and I glanced over to see Pearson trembling almost violently. His BR55 was striking the metallic ground with every tremor that wracked his fear-ridden body. His boyish face quickly filled me with shame as I watched. This kid was nothing but that, a child, while I was an experienced soldier and almost twice his age. Shaking and cowering wasn't something a man like myself did, no matter how terrifying the enemies I might be facing.

"When I move, I want you to run Pearson. Run like the fucking wind and don't look back. Grab the others and go."

Once again that same calm demeanor assumed control over my voice, even though my eyes still refused to leave the creature that was now only twenty or so yards away.

"Sarge?" Pearson asked.

"Don't think, just do it," I replied, and not leaving much time for a rebuke, I pushed off the ground and charged straight towards the beast. A muttered curse and combat boots scraping against the ground was all I could hear as Pearson took off backwards, running towards the other soldiers. My momentary suicidal thought quickly subsided, as the creature prepared to swing a massive clawed hand that promised to tear me into individual serving sizes for it to chow down on with little discomfort. The straight path I was running quickly took a turn as I pivoted and charged further down the street, heading in the opposite direction that Pearson was headed. To give the thing incentive to follow me, I fired a few shots from my handgun, and watched with a kind of dawning realization that while the rounds most certainly did strike the thing, I might as well have been throwing pebbles at it. As a blood-curdling growl came from the beast as it bounded off after me, I sympathized that at least my initial goal had been accomplished. The thing was following me, and not the others.

My mind was trying to turn over the thought of where the hell I was going to go from here, when the ground literally exploded behind me, nearly catapulting me off my feet and into the air. I stumbled heavily, my hands coming down to stop me from slamming into the ground. I spared a glance behind me only to see that the creature had caught up to me in a single leap from where we first parted ways. Fear-fueled adrenaline coursed through me, giving me the drive to actually right myself and continue sprinting. With a curse I ducked into an alleyway, barely wide enough to accommodate my size. The Covenant were certainly more immaculate than humanity. The alleyways were as free and uncluttered as the rest of the city, giving me an easy passage through the alley and out into the next street, which lead into a courtyard. Covenant architecture may have been alien to me, but I could recognize an area meant for relaxing in any society. It looked to be the only place in the highly mechanized city that wasn't covered with the same drab design as all Covenant technology possessed.

The courtyard was spherical, and was actually decorated and lined with some foreign kind of lighting display. Dusk had already passed in this side of Danrun, which gave the lights a much more prominent look than if there were still an external source of light. A wide staircase lead down into the courtyard, and I was only a few feet away when what felt like a fifty tonne wrecking ball slammed into me from behind. Granted I've never been hit by one before, but I'm sure the experience is the same.

What little air was left in my lungs exploded out as I was crushed into the ground, my inertia that carried over from both my sprinting and getting struck from behind sent me tumbling down the wide staircase that led into the courtyard. I hit the ground hard, and in a vain effort I tried to pull my handgun free of the holster I had deposited in when my sprinting began. It had barely cleared the holster when one of the creatures paws stomped down upon my midsection, effectively pinning my hand.

There was no time to think, my remaining arm came up, seconds before the creature reared downwards, ready to tear my head from my shoulders. Instead, it's mouth caught the artificial limb attached to my arm. Whatever metal it was made out of, it seemed to be a fair bit sturdier than whatever the Covenant used to cover the ground, as it wasn't immediately torn to shreds when the beast began to violently thrash about, attempting to tear the limb from my body.

With it's giant paw crushing against my stomach, I could hardly struggle to take in any oxygen and my vision began to blur. I pulled vainly at my trapped arm, the oxygen deprivation lowered my awareness and I accidentally fire the pistol trapped in my hand. Sending a single round through my thigh. If I had the energy I would have screamed, as the shot did nothing more than injure myself, and cause the beast to plunge the heavy claws on its hand into my stomach in an attempt to cease my struggles, easily ripping through my fatigues and into my flesh. The pain seemed distant, and my mind became sluggish as spots swam in front of my eyes. Everything around me became hazy, as my consciousness slowly dissipated.

Even if I was mentally aware of what was going on, I doubt I could have heard the gunshots over the increasingly audible snarls coming from the creature. That said, I certainly noticed when the shots peppered the ground around me, kicking up metal fragments that sliced into my left arm and face. The merciless tug-of-war the creature had with the artificial limb ended, and it leapt free of my body, pausing merely to bat me aside as if I were nothing but a discarded toy. My heart thudded in my ears, but I could still pick up on the voices of the others.

"Pearson try aiming for the goddamn alien instead of Sarge!"

"If I want your input McLennan I'll fucking ask for it! Go make sure Weir gets in position cause I sure as hell don't want that thing coming after me!"

I was weak. My limbs felt heavy, and my head lolled to the side against my will. I caught sight of two Marines, Pearson and McLennan, standing on top of the staircase that I was unceremoniously shoved down by the very large creature currently charging towards them. Pearson was shouldering his BR55, firing three-round bursts at the

beast. His shots for the most part went wide, and when they did hit the creature, they appeared to glance off it's thick hide. Not realizing the futility of his efforts, Pearson switched over to Full-Auto, and emptied an entire clip in about ten seconds.

"Weir now would be a very good time to get your fat ass in position!" the hapless soldier shouted when he saw that his shots had done absolutely nothing to stop the rampaging creature as it continued it's charge towards him.

There was no retort from Weir as far as I could tell from my position down in the courtyard, at least as far as verbal communication goes, but he sure as hell let Pearson know he was in position. A heavy whoosh was all that could be heard, and a second later the rampaging creature was lost in a cloud of phosphorous smoke. My breath was returning to me and I was able to pull myself to up onto my hands and knees, looking closely and spotting Weir from his position in the second floor of a nearby Covenant building that overlooked the courtyard. From where I was I couldn't exactly see, but I knew that he had fired his M5A4's secondary weapon. The 'Little Boy'. It hadn't changed much over the half decade since I last saw it in use, it still packed a hell of a punch. Judging from the fact that Pearson wasn't torn to shreds by now, the hybrid grenade managed to stop that beast in its tracks.

"You all right down there Sarge?" Pearson bellowed down to me, his BR55 almost cockily raised in salute. I wasn't in a condition capable of speaking just yet, so I settled for giving a simple wave from where I was now sitting with my legs stretched out in front of me. The smoke surrounding the crater where Weir's shot his was beginning to clear as I checked my arm for any signs of damage to inner workings of the limb. The bullet wound in my thigh, and the savage tears along my abdomen were beginning to mend all ready, thanks to the Flood DNA that still coursed inside my blood. Had it been anyone else, those wounds combined would have likely resulted in a quick death by the severing of the main artery by the bullet wound that I inflicted upon myself with my useless struggling. The smoke was gone now, and I could feel a prickling sensation along the back of my neck even before I saw that the crater was empty.

Pearson screaming out a warning was about all I received before I whipped my body around, just in time to see the creature emerge from behind the veil of darkness that shrouded the upper portions of the courtyard. I reached for my handgun the had been deposited beside me earlier. I was able to feel the cold steel along the pistols handle, just before I was struck by a rather vicious backhand. Tossed through the air once more, my face cracked painfully against the metallic earth. I tumbled to a stop near the center of the courtyard, my hand able to grasp the knife I kept within the sheath on my right calf before the creature was upon me once again. Those same foreign lights I marveled at when I first saw the courtyard were illuminating the beast that was poised above me for the second time. I was weaker than before, but I still swung my knife in a wide arch, slamming it into the beast's leg, burying it to the hilt. Once again it seemed the attack did little more than piss the thing off, and I was struck once more, skidding against the ground and crashing painfully against what appeared to be a kind of bench.

Weakly I attempted to crawl beneath it, but I had no sooner shifted my head underneath when it was quite abruptly torn free and tossed

aside, as if weighed no more than an ounce. The putrid, foul breath of the beast rolled down along my neck, a familiar feeling by this point. Death was behind me, and I was about to embrace it, giving my life in exchange for this peace.

But I do not want to die.

This thought startled me, and as I felt a lone leg crash down against my back, pinning me to the ground, panic overtook me. My strength was gone, but in weak mumblings and tears of frustration and sadness, I let my last act of defiance free.

I don't wanna die, I can't look across the barrier that exists between life and death and make that journey to the other side. I have to live! My life is too precious to be stolen like this. How hypocritical of me to think this, but please, please I cannot die here! Someone, anyone come and heal me, save me from this fate!

â€|

Is this selfish of me? I want to live, and I would gladly trade the lives of any creature in this universe to survive.

â€|

Give me one last chance at this life. I won't waste it, and I will never take this existence for granted ever again. Please God, help me!

â€|

_It hurtsâ€|it hurts bad. Why can't this pain go away? Let me die peacefully! What have I done to deserve this kind of death? Is it because I gave the soldiers peace? I saved them from this! Saved them from experiencing this same pain! _

â€|

â€|

I want to be in love, to have love like Walle had. Why couldn't I fall in love with a girl? Am I supposed to be alone? I wanna be in love! I can die like that!

â€|

â€|

â€|

Why can't I see? All I can see is blood. Why the fuck is this happening to me? What the fuck? Fuck! I can't feel anything. Everything's red. My hands trembling, and I can't even fucking tell without seeing it!

â€|

â€|

Shut the fuck up! I'm a fucking Marine, I don't bitch and moan like a Goddamn coward. I joined the Corps knowin' this would happen since day fucking one. Death is part of the job description, and I'm gonna meet my maker wearin' a grin.

â€|

â€|

_The pain! I can't take it anymore! I don't want to suffer like this! Someone end this please! _

Why can't I go out like those lucky bastards that the Covenant killed back on Reach. I'd be better off going like that, in an instant. Humanity wouldâ€|it'd beâ€|â€|

It hurts...it hurts! Make it stopâ€|please. I'm so scaredâ€|why can't it all leave?

â€|

â€|

_Everything is so fucking pointlessâ€|this warâ€|everything. We shoulda just blown each other apart years agoâ€|it'd save everyone a lot of trouble. Fuck! Fuck this planet! This stupid fucking war!__

>

â€|

â€|

I'm sorryâ€|everyone. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry!

â€|why am I apologizing? What the hell am I sorry for? Why am I feeling so guilty? I can't stop it!

I'm sorry world! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm SORRY!

Its fadingâ€|everything's goneâ€|

â€|

â€|

â€|

â€|momâ€|

â€|

It should have been the end. I died then, and yet I didn't. My consciousness was gone, and it was replaced with something else. An intense emotion so strong that it consumed me. My soul was now dedicated to this yearning. This hunger. This need to feed.

My body was broken, and yet there was no pain. My weight disappeared in an instant, and everything became simpler.

Ferocity overtook me, and my body tore free of the beast's hold, the wounds inflicted not even registering with my mind. The blade I had impaled the beast with along the leg was now free, within my hand. This senseless urge to kill and to feed drove me forward, my strength returned and overflowing. As fast as my enemy was, I was now faster, and more committed to this battle. Three strikes with my knife, and the beast fell to the ground, the leg that had pinned me down was now useless. I stumbled along, my body may be strong, but it was damaged as it was, and it would take time to mend. That could be taken care of, after my enemy was incapacitated, and ready for harvesting.

But I fell, this newfound strength suddenly leaving me, and with it the intensity that came with it. My consciousness returned, as did the pain, and I screamed as I convulsed on the ground. It felt as if I had been pulled apart from the inside-out. I was now bearing my flesh to the outside world.

A shimmer against the night caught my attention, and a sudden explosion of light blinded me. A bestial scream tore through the night, cut off suddenly and shortly followed by a fleshy thump. I twisted my head, and saw that the beast had been decapitated by a plasma blade, held in the hands of an Elite that was still camouflaged by its cloaking technology. It watched the felled beast for a moment before its veil disappeared, and I found myself staring into the face of the Elite. It watched me in confusion, and to my surprise, a little fear.

"I require your assurancesâ€¦before I assist you, that you will not attack me," the Elite spoke, its tone even and calm.

I could no more than whimper pitifully as I shuddered against the pain. The Elite seemed torn between assisting me and beheading me with the same plasma blade held within his grasp.

"Its all right 'Eranumee, Sergeant Johnson won't bite. He's the nicest badass you'll ever encounter," a female voice announced. It was familiar to me, and I watched as Jan slowly walked towards the Elite and I. She nodded at the questioning look the Elite gave her, and then glanced down at me.

"You've looked better," she commented with a smile, before kneeling down and grabbing hold of my shoulder as the Elite took the other, and slowly pulled me to my feet. The pain was still intense, but I could tell from experience that the wounds were beginning to heal.

"The human has been injured, Miss Janissary," the Elite spoke, voicing what I thought was a very obvious fact. Jan smiled good-naturedly, and I could feel something stir within me as I watched her face, almost transfixed.

"Johnson is a lot tougher than his baby-face lends you to think. Hold him up 'Eranumee and I'll take a look," the girl said as she slowly eased out from beside me and I felt the Elite take hold of my full weight, keeping me from toppling over. Jan must have somehow gotten on the good side of this Elite, as I'd never seen one so readily accepting of a human, let alone a casual order from a human.

Jan lifted my flak jacket, a sharp intake of breath indicating that

she saw the numerous abrasions and outright tears along my flesh. I winced as she lightly probed a particular gash along my abdomen, and was surprised when a fervid desire seemed to overtake me. It was not a sexual desire, even though I had found the girl to be a source of sexual release before. This profound voracity was on a level that was beyond any physical need. It was the same emotion I felt when fighting the beast, when I felt nothing but this intensity.

"Are you going to be all right?" Jan asked, and I was forced to consciously repress my thoughts as I found my voice.

"I should be better in an hour or so. If you can find someplace where I can rest without having to worry about running into one of those things again, it'd help a lot."

"A Sharquoi," the Elite replied behind me, his strong voice reverberated through me. "They are a terrible weapon of the Covenant. Possessing the strength of the Lekgolo, the speed of the Kig-Yar, and the ferocity of the Jiralhanae, they are indeed a strong adversary. It had been our intention before the dissention to release them on your home world as a final act of vengeance against you humans. I found it to be a despicable act at the time, and now I believe I was right even more so. The Covenant are truly pathetic to use those beasts in this battle. They care not for who they kill or maim. You are certainly an incredible warrior, human, to be able to incapacitate it in such a manner."

"I think we should save the bedtime stories till we've got Johnson someplace where he can rest," Jan interjected, and with a simple word of confirmation from 'Eranumee, I was carted off. I saw the other soldiers from my platoon along the way, and I was glad to see they were still alive, even as my mind was focused on what happened to me.

I was changing, I could feel it. When that Sharquoi pinned and tore away at my body as I slowly died, something had changed. A sensation throughout my entire being filled me, and frightened me. It was as if I no longer could feel fatigue or weakness, that I had gone beyond the limitations placed upon me by this human body. That came with a price though, and that was in the form of the intense desires that consumed my very soul. It was as if I was starved, but I did not desire any food or substance.

Frightening as it was, I decided that I would never speak of what occurred on this day to any living soul; and I saw that through until the very last day of my life.

Things were changing in this war, within me. Whatever it was, I would not understand the severity of it until it was too late, and I had no choice but to give in to those creeping, stalking emotions that were now buried within me again.

****Author's Notes:** Interesting no? This was originally going to be a part of a large sequence in Chapter 22, but after computer failures and massive rewrites that were not wanted, I was forced to cut it, but at the time I was determined to bring it back somehow, and that's when this idea came up. To make it a short side story, and to even

change the perspective. Dropping the third person narrative of the overall story and adopting the first person outlook. I greatly enjoyed it, and I hope you guys did too.**

Before everyone asks, Johnson is not having a romantic entanglement with Jan. His feelings are on a level that those of you who are clever enough will figure out, then promptly grow very worried for Jan, and for Johnson.

Apologies if the later bit of the story appeared to be unedited, because it was. My normal proof-reader had to take a sabbatical herself, as she was feeling under the weather. She's a tough one thoughâ€|

I could only stand doing the first half, then I decided to hell with it.

25. The End of a War Chapter 23

Author's Notes: I'm back, and here's a chapter for you. Its got a lot of talking, so put your dialogue-loving caps on. I've got a lot to say at the end of the chapter too, so MAKE SURE YOU READ THE AUTHOR'S NOTES DOWN THERE!

Oh right, also, I've started a forum in the Halo Forum section called "The End of a War: Questions and Answers" where everyone can get all those pesky questions you guys are asking that I always forget to answer, actually answered for once. So head on over and ask away, and I promise I'll answer them all. I'm guessing I'll be getting lots of "Why do you suck so much?" types of questions after this chapter thoughâ€|

The End of a War

Chapter 23

History

There was quite a large difference between where the Prophet of Truth was now heading and where he had once thought he might end up. After the retrieval of the Forerunner vessel from High Charity, he believed at the time that his destination would be the human world. There the Ark would open up to him, granting access to the Pure Blood's most sacred weapon, and the device that would give the Prophets unrivaled power throughout the universe.

Because of the Demon however, everything had gone awry. The crystal, a device used to give it's owner power over time itself, was destroyed. The Forerunner vessel was then locked down, and activated a protocol Truth had never known existed. From there, after several long days of transit, he and his following of Covenant forces emerged beside a planet that Truth wished he would never live to see. The birthing place of the Prophets, and the resting place of a race that would destroy the universe.

Everything that could go wrong, had, and now Truth was forced to realize that perhaps his fate was tied to this Half-Breed, this creature that granted his continued existence.

Understanding this, and accepting it were two separate things however. The thought that he was to be a captive by this creature was insulting, and shameful. He was a hierarch of the Covenant, an organization that would prove to be deadlier than the Forerunners and the Half-Breeds.

There was little he could do, for resistance would mean his death. The Half-Breed knew of the Prophets betrayal from the past, and the creature would quite easily end his life if Truth proved to be cumbersome.

From his seat at one of the navigation stations aboard the Forerunner bridge, the Prophet of Truth cast a wary glance at his captor. The Half-Breed was seated motionless in the commander's chair, it's large body fitting uncomfortably within the small confines. The creature was nearly half-again as tall as the Demon, and looked a great deal more powerful. Judging from the Half-Breed's dispatch of the other Covenant members, it's strength had dwindled not an ounce during his hibernation.

Truth attempted to read the Half-Breed's expression, but the twisted flesh gave nothing away. It's eyes were closed in contemplation, or perhaps rest, while the rest of it's face was blotted and scarred, showing the terrible results of the procedure that created it.

The horrific appearance undoubtedly did not bother the Half-Breed. No, they were unconcerned with such things. They did not gaze upon brightened glass or mirrors, to stare longingly at their own vanity. Becoming a Half-Breed resulted in the destruction of those concerns, and replaced them with the unending urge to feed and consume.

The Grand Prophet of Law already explained many of the Half-Breed's origins to the Prophet of Truth during his enlightenment. Their war with the Pure Bloods, and the battles against the Reclaimers of old, everything was unfurled before his mind during the Prophet of Law's enlightenment period. Truth was the recipient of so much information, enough that the origins of the universe itself were within his grasp.

During the period, Truth knew that the Prophet of Law kept information from him, but just why that was, he couldn't say. Truth was to be Law's successor once his body wore out completely. There was talk of turning him into an A.I program, but Law had refused to even consider it. Information that he possessed would go to his grave, and nothing would change that.

Or perhaps something will, Truth thought to himself as he turned away from the Half-Breed. Whatever the creature's intention, it was certain that the Prophet of Law was involved somehow. If he stayed on the Half-Breed's side at least for the time being, than he might be given a glimpse of those items that were withheld from him during the enlightenment.

Truth felt no compassion for his fellow Prophets, not even the Prophet of Law. Power struggles had existed within the Covenant for millennia's in the past, but Truth would become the first Prophet since their creation to become the Grand Hierarch. If the Half-Breed killed the Prophet of Law, that simply meant he would ascend to the title sooner than anticipated. Once the Prophet of Law was gone, it would be a simple matter of using the legions of loyal Covenant to

wear down the Half-Breed until it's power waned to the point where it needed sustenance.

"How much further must we traverse?" the Half-Breed spoke, shattering the illuminating thoughts coursing through Truth's mind. A quick consultation with the navigation equipment in front of him showed Truth that they were only a few hours from reaching Danrun.

"We shall arrive shortly," Truth responded, hoping his tone was even and lax. The slightest hint of betrayal could set the Half-Breed off, and judging from it's course breathing and snarls, the creature was suffering from it's lack of feeding. Whatever sustenance he received from devouring Truth's troops was wearing off quickly.

_We must reach Danrun soon, otherwise I will become food for this creature, _ Truth thought.

"Good," the Half-Breed said. "I desire to hear your Prophet of Law's words."

As do I.

There was much commotion and eagerness as the small human vessel arrived inside the northern docking bay of the _Honor Without Mercy_. Word of it's occupants had spread from the bridge to the southernmost tips of the engineering rooms, and many Sangheili, Lekgolo, and Unggoy had briefly left their posts to catch a glimpse of the ship. With the Covenant fleet retreating to the western planes of Danrun, they were free of worry for the moment, but had the Arbiter learned of this mass abandonment, he would have been annoyed to a great degree.

Aonlum sent down a convoy of Sangheili to escort the occupants of the ship from the docking bay. For the first time in nearly two days, Aonlum left the bridge and awaited the arrival of the others inside the officer's chambers. There he sat at the head of a great table, where many months ago the Prophet of Mercy had spoken of war plans with other Sangheili Generals.

As he waited, questions filtered through his mind, unnerving him. Reports from Gestahl spoke of a great change in their fortune. The Covenant army had been routed, by a lone soldier of whom only the humans knew the identity of. Granted only a small fraction of the army the Covenant brought to Gestahl had been eliminated, but the sudden destruction of so many troops was sufficient in bringing them pause, and then the desire to flee, retreating to the Covenant-held portions of the planet. That question alone carried the greatest weight within him, and Aonlum troubled himself for a long time over what could have possibly occurred to wipe out so strong a force that the Covenant had employed in order to recapture Gestahl.

With a flourish, the doors facing Aonlum opened without delay, and in walked the convoy of Sangheili. One of the warriors stood aside, and bowed low to Aonlum as he spoke.

"Grand Arbiter, I bring before you by your orders those who dwelt within the human vessel. I requested of them their names, and in return I received cold looks of steel. The only one who gave his name

freely was the one named Fasul, a creature that is aged beyond time itself."

"Bring them before me," said Aonlum. "I have little patience for pleasantries at the moment."

Righting himself quickly the Sangheili who had spoken, quickly beckoned for his entourage to enter the room.

Aonlum rose from his seat as the group entered. A human female, clad in the clothing of a civilian came first. In her hand she carried a small tablet, and projected was the figure of Cortana, the Construct he had spent many days conversing with before the Demon's departure. Following the two was another Demon, one who wore the armor that he had seen the Master Chief wear on the first Halo Installation. This Demon seemed unquestionably strong, as it's gaze reflected not a single concern over her situation, surrounded by those that once were her enemy.

Finally in walked the creature that Aonlum most desired to see. The Forerunner that he had spoken with before. Fasul. The creature's gait was of confidence and unconcern, as if he owned the ship he now walked upon, and no creature would dare question his presence. Despite his earlier discovery that Fasul was nothing but a hologram, he found it hard to discern as the creature stepped forward, looking all the while as one that was alive, made of flesh and bone.

"It has been some time since a human last stood inside this room," Aonlum said at length, his eyes settling on the two humans, primarily the other Demon. "He was your brother I would say."

"If you speak of the Master Chief, then I must correct you," the Demon spoke, and Aonlum was taken aback to hear the feminine tone. "He is not my brother, but is instead my Commander."

"I see," Aonlum replied, and then his gaze moved to the civilian human. "You I have spoken before. Catherine Halsey is your name?"

"Yes," the human remarked. "I am the creator of the project that gave birth to these soldiers you Covenant refer to as Demons."

"Do not refer to my people with such a name," Aonlum replied, his tone grave. "We are no longer shared of the doom that the Covenant bring upon themselves. The Sangheili and our comrades share the plight of humanity, bearing the full truth of the Great Journey."

"I apologize," Halsey said. "It has been only a short while since I learned of the events that took place on the other Halo Installation. My escort and I have busied ourselves elsewhere in the universe."

"So you have," Aonlum spoke, once again looking at the Forerunner. To his surprise he found the Construct staring back at him with it's wizened eyes. At once Aonlum felt himself pierced by an unseen force, and his body was stripped bare of clothing. He stood naked before the Forerunner as the creature stared through him, breaking his form and composure. No longer was he Gann Aonlum, Arbiter of the Sangheili. At that moment he had become nothing more than a child, a beggar on the streets that held his hands cupped forth.

As quickly as he was ensnared, Aonlum found himself freed of the Forerunner's gaze. His breathing was haggard and thin rivulets of sweat traced down his thick neck. The darkness peeled away, revealing once again the commander's room of Honor Without Mercy.

"I have heard of you," Fasul spoke, using the tongue of the Sangheili, "Arbiter of the tamed dogs. You met the one of whom darkness cannot keep hidden. The prisoner of time and malice, one that fate has deemed to play out a part in this act, that has yet to be seen or realized."

"You speak of the Flood leader?" Aonlum said, his words forced from his mouth. A bitter laugh arose from Fasul as it's hood was cast back, revealing to him the features of it's face.

"It is not their leader. No, this one you call Gravemind, he is perhaps the greatest tool of the Flood but he is not their leader. No form other than a Half Breed could accept such a title. The creation was a result of our foolishness, our desire to fight our enemy on their own terms. We delved too deep into the abyss that is the Flood genetic code, and we extracted and combined it with our own, sacrificing innocence for our success. In the end we created our downfall, as 'Gravemind' became a tool of the Half-Breeds."

"You spoke of these 'Half Breeds' before, what are they?" Aonlum asked.

"There is much that must be said, and during that time I shall answer all of your questions. For even though time has begun to run out for this universe, all will be revealed before you, but first I ask that you gather all those that must hear my words. As well I desire to know the fate of the one you call a 'Demon'. Grant me that wish, and I shall give you everything that you desire to understand."

* * *

>And so a call was sent throughout the entire fleet of ships and ground forces that surrounded Danrun. Commanders and political leaders loyal to the Sangheili and the destruction of the Covenant were called to the Honor Without Mercy. All who would hear the words of one that once lived so many years ago were asked to proceed to the flagship at their most urgent speed. They came, and at once they were ushered into the room that soon became full.

Seated amongst the table was the human commander, Captain Miranda Keyes, and her escort, Sergeant Avery J. Johnson. They sat to the left of the Arbiter, close at hand, for even though hostilities between humanity was ended, still the others looked upon the humans with suspicious eyes. Close to the Arbiter on the right was seated High Councilor Pondomee, and with him as an escort had come Lan 'Eranumee. The latter of which had been requested to come by Councilor Pondomee, as he had grown fond of the Seraph Pilot in the short time they spoke since the hostilities had ended briefly over Danrun. Several other Sangheili Commanders came as well, intent on being included within the Arbiter's council. Aside from the humans and Sangheili, several Unggoy had been asked to attend as well. Their stature outside of the Covenant seemed to have remained the same, as they were still looked down upon by the Sangheili, but the Arbiter was intent on having equality amongst their army, and by extending a

welcome hand to the Unggoy, it would soon be spread throughout the fleet that the Unggoy were included within the council. Finally several Lekgolo did come, and despite the creature's assurances that they had no interest in politics outside of directives towards whom they were supposed to maim and kill, the Arbiter brought them in regardless.

In total, two humans, seven Sangheili, seven Unggoy, and four Lekgolo were brought into the council. Including the two other humans and the Arbiter, twenty three had gathered to question and listen to Fasul's words.

* * *

>Opposite to where Aonlum sat, Fasul had taken a seat at the opposing head of the table, where it would be simple for all eyes to see him. The Lekgolo were seated around him, straining the chairs on which their heavy bodies sat.<p><p>

"You said that this is as many that will come, so I shall begin my story, but first I ask that you tell me of the information I requested," spoke Fasul. "Tell me of the condition that the one you call "Demon" is currently in."

"Pelicans carrying several of the wounded from the opening skirmish at Gestahl docked with the Lewis Puller just as I prepared to debark. Sergeant Johnson informed me that the Master Chief is unconscious, but in stable condition," Captain Miranda Keyes said. Fasul momentarily appeared worried, but the look faded quickly.

"Perhaps that is where we should begin," Aonlum said. "I wish to know what has happened to the Demon, and why he has become as powerful as he has."

"Powerful?" Fasul echoed softly. "I suppose that is one way of looking at the situation. If this is the place you wish to start, than I shall begin here.

"The warrior that you call the Demon is no more. Whatever consisted of his being has been pushed into remission, and in place has surfaced the one whom slept within the suit of the First Reclaimer for thousands of years. Cyriacus is now in control of the body that belonged to this 'Demon'."

"How is that possible?" Aonlum asked, genuinely interested. "I would not think to alter one's state of mind could be such a simple task."

"It certainly is not," Fasul nodded. "The technology involved surpasses my own understanding of Majal advancements in that area. Unfortunately my own expertise was focused on the political spectrum throughout the war with the Half-Breeds."

"Do you mean to say that you do not understand how the Demon's suit works?"

"Regrettably so," Fasul replied. "I have existed for over one hundred thousand years as an A.I program within the confines of the Halo network. Over that great span of years, I have lost much when it

comes to the information accessible to me. The Majal were technically advanced, but we still face problems with recreating complex A.I programs that are modeled after previously existing entities, much like the humans do today."

Aonlum's eyes strayed to the Construct, Cortana, and he watched her form flicker momentarily along the data panel that the human civilian had brought. His mandibles clicked thoughtfully as he prepared to respond.

"I would ask the question of why you have altered the Demon's mind, but I fear that it shall lead us off track. You speak words that I do not fully comprehend. 'Majal', 'Half-Breed', 'Cyriacus'? Perhaps if you would start over at the beginning. What prompted the construction of the Halo Installations? You mentioned a war with another species, was it the Flood?"

"Not entirely," said Fasul. "The Flood were employed and used as 'Harvesters of the Dead' by the creatures that my people fought against. Had the war been simply staged against the Flood, there would be no need for the Halo Installations. The Flood were a nuisance at best."

"Surely you speak lightly. The Flood are a terrible creation, they nearly decimated my entire fleet when I first stumbled upon them."

"I do not mean to make light of your loss to the Flood, Arbiter of the Fallen, but keep in mind that the Majal are far more advanced in terms of weaponry. We did not have to rely on our own soldiers to fight the Flood. Artificial Sentinels could do the job more efficiently and at a much smaller loss to us. You have seen them before correct, on the Halo Installations?"

Aonlum nodded slowly in return.

"Then you are aware that they are more than capable of handling the Flood without our interference. The war that I speak of put the Flood to a greater task, consumed of evil incarnate. They became the 'Harvesters of Flesh', rending bone and sinew, twisting what once was alive into a malformation of flesh. A task is not given without reason, and the Half-Breeds ordered this to be done, as they are much like the Flood. The continuous urge and need to feed consumes their dark souls, creating a never-ending spiral of death and destruction. But they cannot obtain the sustenance their deformed bodies yearn for by themselves, the Flood are used to that end. They release spores within a captive host, mutating the flesh and blood, creating lesser beings that can be used both for battle, and for consumption. We studied for some time the act that the Half-Breeds use to extract the necessary food from the harvested bodies of the Flood's victims, but even to this day I cannot say for certain what particular mutation is necessary for the Half-Breed's to feed."

"What are the Half-Breeds?" asked Aonlum. "They are related to the Flood I gather, but you speak of them as if you once knew them well."

Fasul paused and sighed, his artificial body slumping slightly against his seat, an effect that was likely more for show than any actual sign of fatigue. The ancient being looked away from those that

gazed at him in anticipation, his eyes gazing through the room and out, across time as he relived his own personal horrors.

"Yes, the Majal did know the Half-Breeds well, as they at one time were our brothers our sisters, our fathers and mothers, and our friends. A 'Half-Breed' as we came to call them, was nothing more than a Majal citizen in the past."

Those gathered in the room listened intently as Fasul began to retell the origin of the Majal. The days past when the once mighty race observed and catalogued the universe, observing other planets, other species, watching and guarding over all life. He spoke of his ancestors with reverence, extolling the virtues of creatures so great that time could not erode their deeds for the universe. There were many things those in the room had heard of in some form or another, as they had all dwelled on planets that the Majal once observed, gazing upon their races when they existed in their infancy.

At length Fasul described a dark discovery the Majal made on an ancient planet, one that was soon to be destroyed, as it had come to the end of its life. The spark deep within its fiery depths would extinguish, and tear the planet apart. Before this event occurred the Majal came to walk upon it's surface, observing the ancient cities and technology that once existed. Weeks were spent upon the planet, studying and dissecting all that they could, as time was beginning to run out. It was in the final days that the fateful discovery was made, an ancient tomb beneath the planet's surface. Ancient traps and devices were laid in the hopes of warding off all intruders, but the Majal were not to be deterred, as they wished to catalogue all that once existed on this planet, so that it could never be forgotten. It was in that sacred tomb that the Majal and the Flood first met, the latter being set free for the first time in millennia's.

There was insufficient time to study the Flood properly, and so a quick decision on the part of seven Majal scientists was made, and Flood specimens were taken into Majal captivity for further study, a decision that prove fatal for every living thing in the entire universe.

Once again Fasul paused, his eyes no longer looking into the past, but they now carried a deep sense of shame.

"I do not make apologies for what my people did at that time, but we were the 'Overseers of the Universe' and we took that title to heart. Had more time persisted, and a debate held on whether to remove the Flood from their tomb, I am certain the same decision would be made that those seven declared with only moments of discussion. We are inquisitive about all living things, and though the Flood was hostile my people would not allow such a rare chance to slip through their fingers."

"But didn't the Flood's hostility make you pause?" Aonlum interjected. "Surely a creature so predisposed towards violence and consumption would make you weary of them."

"The Flood slept for an incredible expanse of time prior to our discovery, and they had weakened during their hibernation. Though they appeared aggressive, at the time we did not believe them to be any serious threat to our safety. During the acquisition process no one was harmed or injured by the Flood specimens, and at the time we

presumed they were simply of a lower life form, unable to form base thought or conjecture thus giving rise to the aggressiveness inherent within their mindset.

"With their home world destroyed, we began to study the Flood, and spent many resources attempting to understand everything about them. As time passed however, we hit many impasses with our research. The Flood's genetic code was such an aggregation that we could not manage to even perceive whether they were a naturally occurring creature, or if it had been artificially constructed. For years we were trapped within a cycle of vain attempts at evading the obstruction, but to no avail. It wasn't until an accidental detonation was triggered at a research facility on our home planet that we realized why perceiving the Flood's origins was such a challenge. Everything within several thousand feet of the accident was destroyed, but upon investigation, we found that the Flood samples persisted. They had survived the blast, and even begun to multiply once they were freed of their containment. The Flood were self-replicating. Upon harm, spores and other toxic particles would be released, ensuring that even more of it's kind would be produced. This likely allowed the species to continuously spread without any foreseeable method of halting the process."

"May I ask what happened with the Flood that escaped?" Miranda Keyes spoke.

"They were recaptured and contained, though now that we knew of their abilities, we allowed for the Flood to replicate within a controlled environment. The information gathered from watching this process was incredible, but like before, a new issue arose that halted our research. It was discovered that the Flood had a very limited life span. By your human measurements, left alone with no outside interference, the Flood could only replicate and survive for a few weeks before passing away. Examining the carcasses of the dead samples, we saw that in only a short period of time, the cells that made up the essence of the Flood's core would simply burn out."

"But you said that the Flood had slept for an immeasurable amount of time prior to your discovering them, surely if that was true, the Flood would be long dead before your people ever encountered them," Miranda Keyes explained.

Drawing the eyes of all that were gathered, Dr. Halsey spoke before Fasul was able to offer his own explanation.

"The Flood exist and follow a very basic instinctual pattern of behavior, Captain," the older woman replied. "You have personally witnessed their most prevalent behavioral instinct, and that is the desire to consume and spread. However, even the most basic of life forms carry at least a minute degree of self-preservation within their genetic makeup, and the Flood perhaps have the most advanced setup than any other creature in the universe. When entering a period of prolonged malnutrition, the Flood will slowly initiate a hibernate state, increasing the production of 'spores' that they release within their hosts, which will cause a suppression in their virulent need to consume and spread. Finally the Flood will stop it's own internal organs, effectively causing it to 'die'. The Flood however, do not decompose the same way all other organic creatures do, as their bodies never truly erode. Instead, the same 'spores' that are used to mutate others, are systematically released while it hibernates;

slowing, and in some cases altogether stopping the erosion of its body. Given the limited time I've had to study this procedure, my guess as to how long they can sustain themselves is merely conjecture on my part, but from what I've gathered the Flood could last upwards to and perhaps exceeding several hundreds of thousands of years."

"You are quite correct Catherine Halsey," Fasul said, his tone belying his surprise for her knowledge. "We never discovered how the Flood were capable of 'awakening' after they entered their hibernate state, but we do know that given any small increment of time, they can reawaken in mere seconds, no matter how long they may have slept. The passage of time does little to affect their overall aggressive nature, as all of you have likely come to realize."

"Returning to your recant, what did your people do with the Flood when you realized their insidious nature?" Aonlum asked.

The look of faraway longing returned to Fasul as he smiled somewhat remorsefully.

"The same thing all advanced life forms do when discovering an attribute within another organism that we found desirable. We set about extracting the desired genetics that gave the Flood their ability to reform and live for extended periods of time, within hibernation. The Majal desired to take that attribute and bestow it upon ourselves."

"Surely you are mistaken!" Aonlum exclaimed audibly. "What madness overcame your race to let such stupidity take root!"

A look of bemusement passed over Fasul as he calmly waited for Aonlum's outburst to pass.

"You judge me do you? That is your right I suppose, as you were once mere lapdogs to the Prophets, bowing beneath them in the hopes of being passed scraps when you became lustful for attention. You looked at the Majal as Gods did you? I suppose it is always the deepest wound when one discovers that those they've placed upon an alter have feet of clay. Funny is it not, that you would presume that the error my people made was any less innocent than the one your own forefathers made when the Prophets first offered their hands to pull you from your barbaric ways, while fingering the blade at their side, imagining the moment when they would be given the chance to plunge it into your back. Shall I judge you then, Arbiter? You are a brave Sangheili, but your blind fanaticism led to the deaths of so many. How many times did you stand on the bridge of your ship, watching with malice as the Covenant fleets burned those human settlements, giving no care that innocent people dwelt there, and that their lives were being erased? It is easy to look down at my people, as we made mistakes greater than any that came before and afterwards, but you are not without sin."

Those at the table tensed as Fasul's calmly delivered insult rocked the Arbiter in his seat, and he dropped his eyes to the surface of the metallic table in shame. Fasul waited for a long moment before smiling once again, this time appearing more genuine than before.

"I understand your outrage, Arbiter, but believe me when I say that we knew very little about the Flood's innate nature, despite how long

we studied their habits. They are very much a mystery to me, even to this day. Where they came from, how they first arrived in this universe, it is all part of a story that I shall never come to know. The threads of this war lead on however, and perhaps as time passes, the story will be told to a future civilization.

"As for the Majal, we were kept in the dark for the most part, concerning the newly designed experiments being conducted on the Flood specimens. In all cases however, keeping such a great secret proved impossible, and like a wildfire it spread through our society, reaching even those of us that were in other galaxies, observing planets and species. A great debate then began within the Majal, those who thought that using the Flood genetics to try and improve upon our own bodies was a transgression against the very code of the universe. They believed that all creatures were given life for the sole purpose of dying.

"In contrast to this group, there were those that believed our role as the 'Overseers of the Universe' granted our species a pardon from that one inevitability given to all life. Death caused a disturbance in our duties, and should we be exempt from it's inescapable grip, then there would be no concerns that as time passed so would the desire to fulfill our role."

Fasul stood from his seat and set about pacing slightly behind his seat.

"I cannot recount how long the debate carried on. Years we argued with one another, from political forums, to clashes between neighbors and families. This matter drove a wedge between our society, ending our once peaceful coexistence with one another. Children and parents, lovers, friendsâ€|all became caught within the snares of this debate, and in the end neither side was ever granted true benefit of knowing the other to be wrong.

"Time would prove however, that all of this debating would become a moot point. The procedure of implementing Flood genetics within a Majal body was perfected, and with no time to spare, it became open for all to partake in."

"Did you not think to use physical force to stop them?" asked Aonlum.

"What would that have accomplished?" Fasul responded, gravely. "Since time began we were a peaceful race and aside from rare moments, there was never bloodshed between Majal. Our respect for life was absolute. Should we have attacked our brethren, we would have become hypocrites. Our protest over the implementation of Flood genetics was that it altered and strayed from the course our ancestors had laid out. Spilling their blood would be the same sin, and so we merely sat in silence, watching our children, our friends, our mothers and fathers. We watched as they took part in that which doomed the universe. The procedure was shrouded in secrecy, but it was well known that it involved more complex work than simply introducing the Flood genes into a Majal body. A stimulant was needed, a reaction of some kind within our own genetic code that could allow them to mend and form with one another, and produce that which we scathingly came to call, 'Half-Breed'. Over the years, scanning and digesting the expanse of information available to me from the information available to me, I've discovered another smaller portion of the procedure. It

involved the introduction of the Flood genes in the same vein that the Flood would force a connection with a host body. During the connection attempt, a varying factor would be introduced, that would harden and cut off any degree of linking with the central nervous system, which would then cause the Flood genes to go dormant. From there they were awakened in some manner, causing the mingling and mutation within the blood stream, forcing a connection to some degree."

Unnoticed by all except Aonlum and Fasul the human, Johnson, began to look somewhat panicked during the A.I's recount of the Flood procedure. A sheen of sweat passed over his face, and his breathing became irregular. The Sangheili stared at the human in concern, while Fasul simply gazed knowingly, sympathy playing across his features as he resumed his story.

"Time passed, and for many years all was well within in our society. There appeared to be no adverse effects from the procedure, and with no reason to protest we came to accept this inevitable change within our culture. Those that went under the procedure emerged no different than what they once were. Many of my friends and those I knew well decided to undergo the experiment. Soon those that were against the procedure were in the minority.

"But like all sudden changes, the decision of the 'Half-Breeds' came at a terrible price. The mutations came with no preemptive notice. I know not what caused the change, but it occurred in an instant. At once, those that we walked and dwelt with were no more."

Dr. Halsey cleared her throat, garnering the attention of the Majal A.I.

"You mean to say that there were no warning signs?" she asked disbelievingly.

"I do not mince words, Catherine Halsey," Fasul responded darkly. "The Half-Breeds became what they were with no warning, and we were as surprised at this change as they were."

"How did this change occur? Was the transformation quick, or did it require time to alter the appearance like when the Flood force a connection with a host?" the doctor pressed.

For the first time Fasul's face became twisted with rage. His countenance, which before had exuded calmness and peace, altered as if he were enveloped within a cloak of darkness. Those at the table felt the tension and shifted uncomfortably, the A.I's growing rage a reminder that the creature was far and above their comprehension. He was perhaps the oldest living mind in the universe. Speaking with him for several hours did not reveal to them even a fraction of his true character.

"There are some things that no one should bear witness to," Fasul spoke, his voice becoming a deep and foreboding growl, "and I will not speak of the terror that my people experienced. No, there are things that shall never be repeated again. I have lived for many years, and time has not lessened the wound given to me, it has only been deepened. Look into the darkness that surrounds this universe you piteous creatures, this is but a glimpse at the ancient evil.

"I have answered enough questions; now you shall be silent and allow me to finish this account on the end of the Majal, and the rise of deception you have all fallen victim to."

The rage left the ancient being, and his eyes became clear, yet they were unfocused even whilst he began to speak. He was living in his memories, and for all the sadness and terror that they gave him, his duty was to bear it all for the sake of atonement. The Majal were as guilty as the Half-Breeds, their sins no less grievous in the genocide that resulted from the war, and the condemnation of a race to become the vanguards of a legacy that should be forgotten by all.

Time was running out for the universe, and far below the Covenant vessel, underneath the hardened surface of Danrun, a deep network of catacombs existed within the planet. Their presence was a secret to all except a select few, and soon the power that nestled within it's darkness would awaken. It held allegiance with no one, and was constructed with the purpose of ending all life.

****Author's Notes: Short chapter! Oh no! What does it mean?****

****Yes, yes indeed. This is a short chapter. The reason? I'm sure some of you have figured it out. I'm a dirty, dirty liar.****

****I can't recall if I said this or not at some point in time, but I know I told some people. In my original plans, I had wanted to do 6 or 7 Forerunner History chapters, but scrapped the idea because it would've taken too long. But as we can see, I don't have any other reason to give as to why I'm cutting this chapter off so terribly short.****

****There was more written, another fifteen pages, plus ten more in the works, as Fasul would go on to explain the downfall of the Majal at the hands of the Half-Breeds. But I was exhausted from having to write the story as such. Too much dialogue, not enough acting things out. So, I did what I always do when faced with a conundrum. I simply tore up those pages, or in reality, cut them out and ended the chapter early. This is because my original idea has resurfaced, and for the next while we get to see the downfall of the most powerful race in the universe. Or should that be races?****

****This is likely going to piss people off, but seriously, as much as I didn't want to be writing another 35 pages of page-long paragraphs of nothing more than talk, I'm sure you guys would want to read it even less. So lets meet each other in the middle all right?****

****I'll promise no more than 2 to 3 chapters exploring the Forerunner history, so instead of 6 to 7, which would mean months and months of waiting, we'll get it out of the way surely and quickly. This way I can give people the gist of things, but also get deep into the Majal culture without having to write thirteen paragraphs explaining Fasul's love of the Majal home world. Well all right, I'll probably do that anyway, but it'll make more sense this way.****

****Once again I remind you all, I've started a forum for everyone to ask those questions you all seem to have, seeing as how I'm incapable of actually remembering all your questions in your reviews, so I never respond, and you all hate me. It's called "The End of a War: Questions and Answers", so if you have something on your mind, scoot on over and ask away. I promise I'll leave no question unanswered, unless it's a spoiler, and then I'll just say, "No Comment."****

26. The Forerunner Chronicles Part One

****Author's Notes: A long time coming. To make a long story short, I was ill for a very long time. I'm better now. The Glossary for the unknown terms is at the bottom of the page.****

****The End of a War****

****Chapter 24 ****

****Forerunner Chronicles Part One
> **

****The Transient Allure of Amelioration****

The forest glade of Omemin Falls was at peace along the distant shoreline that lined the border of the continent, sublime serenity playing through the cascading meadows and dense foliage, lined amidst the horizon with the grand outcropping of the Lynfold Mountains. Much of the land that adorned the planet of Ual was decorated with the same vegetation as was present within Omemin Falls, for it was a planet unmarred by intelligent life forms, seeking to harvest it's resources. Fyorn trees native to the planet, stretched to varying heights decorating the canopy above with a capturing display of natural beauty. A lone beaten path was all that marred the otherwise captivating scenery, and it was upon this path that the two Majal walked down. The elder of the two stood high, his height nearly twice again the size of the child that hustled beside him. A loose cloth hung from his body, the fabric giving off a faint glimmer as the light pierced through the high canopy and doused the two in radiance. His tanned skin, a deep brown that seemed to almost play off the natural bright blue tint leant to his body was hidden from the light, as the elder carried a large cloth bundle with him that kept a the greater portion of his body in the shadows. The breeze skimming through the trees leant them relief from the midday heat, which left the elder parched, while the child, being carefree as all children should be, was oblivious to his own needs as he laughed gaily while clutching the hand of the elder Majal.

Soon the Fyorn trees were left behind as they emerged from the forest and stepped onto the soft grass that now covered the open meadow. With a nervous glance at the elder Majal, and receiving the answering nod from his questioning glance, the child freed himself from the elder's grasp and ran ahead allowing the simple robes he wore to billow in the current of wind that swept unquestioned through the open field. The elder Majal watched with adoration in his eyes as the child lost himself to the world, and with a shake of the head, he unhitched the bundle of cloth that was draped over his shoulder. Caution tinting his actions, the elder unfurled the cloth and removed an intricately designed bow, its wood a deep green with carvings of detailed fauna decorating its length. Tender were his motions as he

plucked the heavy bowstring and listened for a moment as it reverberated a deep thrumming tone through the still air. Next, the Majal freed a long quiver filled with finely crafted arrows and he spilt the deadly spearheads onto the fine cloth, ensuring that none were cracked or worn. Once this task was completed, he looked out into the lush field and searched with his eyes for the small child that had been forgotten shortly. Concern dotted his face and with a great breath, he cupped his heavy, calloused hands to his mouth and called the child's name. The wind carried his voice down the meadow, for the child soon appeared waving with abandon and running still, having not tired an ounce despite his hurry to go wherever his feet may have taken him.

The elder Majal waited primly as the child neared, taking sight of the ancient weapon set upon the cloth and slowing his pace as a wave of apprehension seemed to grip his small frame.

"Father are you sure that I am ready to undertake this training? I overheard some of the others in my class say that their fathers are adamant that they must prove their admittance amongst the Kyl'shi(1) before they are even granted the right to gaze upon the family Gail(2)," the child spoke, worrying his hands nervously as he stared at the ancient bow and arrows as if they were touched by a holy spirit, and if he were to draw too close they would be tainted forever. The elder Majal watched his child as he drew a long breath that left him in a rush whilst he smiled at the everlasting gentle spirit the child possessed.

"You worry too much Absolon, surely you do not think that I would be so foolish as to prepare this ceremony without thinking you were ready? Do you think so little of your father?" the elder Majal asked.

"Certainly not father," Absolon said urgently as he moved forward and grasped his father's hands. "You have always taught me well, and I love you for it. If not for your guidance and care, I believe I would have not nearly so good a life as I have now. Since you have such confidence in me, I shall do all I can to not disappoint you!"

The earnest look in the child's eyes stilled the laughter that brewed within the elder, for he knew it would crush Absolon's spirit. The look of determination that overflowed from the child amused and touched the elder greatly; he nodded his head deeply at the child, and began to carry through the steps of the ceremony.

Reverence flowed from the elder's movements as he brought the ancient bow into his left hand and removed a long, slender arrow from the quiver. Sighting a Fyorn tree near the opposite end of the meadow, the elder placed with blunt end of the arrow against the taut bowstring, and pulled back as his body tensed. He kept his stance rigid as his arms were horizontally aligned, and with his body sighted, he slowly relaxed his draw hand. With a flourish of sound, the arrow was released, and it swept across the open plain where it quite soundly impaled itself into the Fyorn tree. The elder worked hard to keep a smile from his face, for he had been greatly worried that the wind would cause him to overshoot his target.

Beside him, Absolon could not keep the awe from his eyes as he realized that his father had indeed hit his target. When his father's eyes turned to watch him, the awe melted away and was replaced by

fear, as he realized it was now his turn to receive the weapon, and then make his shot.

"Do not chose a target too far away," his father warned as the bow was passed. Absolon glanced fearfully around him until he sighted a tree that looked as if it were within his range. Setting his angular jaw, the child mimicked his father's preparations and released the notched arrow. Unlike his father however, Absolon's arrow faltered only fifty feet away from its target and slammed into the ground. The child watched in shock, whimpering slightly over his failure when he felt a feather touch on his shoulder.

"That was a very good shot," the elder said approvingly.

"But father, I did not hit my target," Absolon exclaimed. "You put your faith in me and I have failed."

"My child, have you ever held a weapon like this before?" the elder asked, and the boy miserably shook his head. "Then how could I expect you to not fail on your first attempt?"

Without waiting for Absolon's response, the elder continued, kneeling down beside the child and staring into his eyes.

"When I was only several seasons older than you, my father took me to this very glade and he took me through the steps of the transferring the Gail. Back then the Fyorn were not as tall, but he still struck his target with assurance. I had been overwrought with fear, and when I first took this bow," the elder said grasping the ancient weapon tightly, "I was unable to balance the weight and dropped it. When I finally learned how to hold it properly, I attempted to fire an arrow at a target much closer then that which you have chosen, and I missed my target by quite a large margin. Much like you, I thought that I had disappointed my father, and when I glanced at him he was staring at me with his hard eyes, betraying no emotion. My first instinct was to weep, and to throw down the Gail with force and flee, but I stayed since I did not wish further shame on my father. Therefore, I took up the bow once more, and attempted to launch another arrow. I missed again, but my arrow went further than before, and when I glanced at my father, I could see an expression of joy behind his impartial face. With every shot I took, his look of concentration was replaced by one of happiness, for he did not care that I had missed. His only concern was that I did not give up, and show determination."

Absolon looked on with his gentle countenance, his eyes brimming with unshed tears over his father's soft tone and loving gaze. Nodding to his beloved father, the young Majal set his face in a grim look of resolution and took the family Gail in his hands again.

"You will watch me then, father?" he asked.

"Yes my child," the elder responded, and added in a tone too soft for Absolon to hear, "I will watch you until the very end."

Therefore, time passed.

Absolon continued the ceremony, his hands working with the bow and arrows. After several hours, he had still yet to strike the Fyorn that had symbolized his target, which is why the sudden sound of an arrow slamming into the indigenous flora caused both Majal to jump

slightly from surprise. The entire forest seemed to still as if it too was shocked by the success of Absolon. The stillness was broken when the child gazed up to see his father's expression, and was quite pleased when he saw the look of silent pride on his face. A great laugh echoed through the clearing as the elder grasped Absolon and lifted him into the air, suspended by his strong arms. Together they laughed and shared the joy the moment brought to both of them.

When the child was set back upon the ground however, the childlike air around him vanished, and was replaced with a pale cloud of darkness. A sudden coughing fit attacked the child, and his father could do nothing but watch on in worry as the child fell to his knees. The elder rushed to him and placed his hands cautiously upon the child's back, and the coughing fit subsided, but the child began to shake with terrible tremors. Fear covering his mind, the elder pulled the child's hands away from his mouth, noticing the deep pockets of blood decorating his hand and long, slender fingers.

"The D'orl(3)," the elder said sadly, bitterly. He pulled Absolon against him and whisked the child into his arms. Climbing to his feet, the elder ran back towards the woodlands, cradling his precious burden with as much care as he could. His large, powerful legs bent and slammed into the ground, his speed hastened by fear and anxiety as the child in his arms felt weaker than the bustling rays of light that attempted to break through the thick canopy over their heads. The family Gail was forgotten, as all worries faded beneath that small dwindling weight cradled in his arms.

There is still timeâ€¦|please do not take this child from me yetâ€¦|

'D'orl' was the term bestowed upon the frightening disease that had struck the Majal population many seasons in the past. Like the harrowing flight of a fallen Gavis(4), the disease flourished throughout every Majal settlement, wiping away over half their population in only a scant seven seasons. It was only through a medical breakthrough by seven Majal chemists that allowed for treatments that would slow and sometimes stall the vengeful D'orl disease as it ripped through a Majal body. As time progressed, and the effectiveness of the treatments were fleshed out, the disease became less deadly, and less known throughout Majal society. It was a rare case for the D'orl to make an appearance at this point in time, and even rarer when the infected were children. Unfortunately, the youngest of the Majal proved to be the most resistant to the treatments available, and ultimately became the greatest suffering age group since the 'Gray Seasons'(5).

Absolon was diagnosed with the D'orl disease upon his second aging, and after so many seasons his body had yet to give out, however it was not a question of 'if', but 'when'. Every treatment he received, the physicians would make their grave notations, comparing the previous notes from his last visit, and announce that the child's body was deteriorating still.

"I am sorry, Father," Absolon wheezed as he tried to still his haggard breaths. "I've always been such a burden for you."

A long silence descended upon them as the elder Majal continued his pace, fighting the tightening grip that was forming around his heart when he heard the weak words spill from the child's throat.

"Save your breath my child," the elder spoke gravely, but tried to keep the darkness away, "You have never been anything other than the brightest light in my life. I know how painful these attacks can be, and I do not wish for you to hurt yourself more to say such foolish things."

"Yes," Absolon breathed, "They are always so very painfulâ€|but, this will be the last time I feel such pain ever again."

The elder was lending the child an ear whilst he dedicated his other senses to reaching their arrival point, and had he not been so keen on attending to Absolon, he might have missed the foreboding tone in his voice. The legs that had worked so hard to carry them several hundred feet in so short a time slowed until they finally ceased completely. Strength left the elder then and he fell to his knees, staring with unbridled fear at the child still cradled in his arms.

"What did you say?" the elder whispered.

"I'm sorry. I asked them not to tell you on my last visit to the treatment centre in Lithiom(6)," Absolon confessed. "I begged that they lie to you, I wished for you and Momma not to know."

"Absolonâ€|" the elder said, his voice choked by his anguish. The smile plastered across the child's face did not bring him the joy it always did, and instead it let the grip all ready taut against his heart tighten once more.

"I'm at my final step Fatherâ€|" Absolon said, "My body has no more strength to give."

The elder wished to scream, to deny the words spilling from his child, but it would have been a foolish excursion, and would only succeed in wasting the few precious moments left.

"Whyâ€|why did you keep it a secret?" the elder moaned.

"I've known for a long time that I wouldn't live past my youth," Absolon replied, his weak limbs clinging almost desperately to his father. "It is something I've come to accept, and I know that you and Momma would not understand even if I explained. I did not wish for my final moments in this life to be spent inside a medical bay, living out my last breaths in those white prisons. Out here on this beautiful planet, in this wondrous forest, and with my beloved Father I can live and die with no regrets."

"How can you say such a thing?" the elder said, his voice breaking and catching as his throat became tight from his pain. "I am your father, I'm supposed to protect you from any kind of pain. If we were in Lithiom you could pass painlessly into the next life at the very least."

"Please do not be angry," Absolon whispered through his pain, "I did not wish to lie, but I had no other way before me."

The elder stuttered for a moment, trying to say somethingâ€|anything. He was silenced when the child began to tremble with a greater

intensity, and his eyes closed in anguish.

"The pain is getting worse, Father," Absolon whimpered. "I can ask only one more thing of you Father. They told me that it would be very painful before the end, so please, hold onto me until I pass. Let your strength become my courage so that I may face this fate."

So weak and pitiful was Absolon's voice, that the elder buried his anguish and pain completely, gripping his child's body tightly and proclaiming, "I will give you all that I have." Unable to save his child from the grip of death, the elder proclaimed to himself, that he would do everything in his power to let Absolon pass with a clear mind. As it was the young Majal was doing everything he could to keep his resolve stoically in the face of the unbearable pain assaulting his body. His mouth opened and closed with such force that the elder was unsure what exactly the child wished to say.

Pain is the undoer of all pride however; the strongest of creatures will bow beneath its indomitable presence. Courage falters amidst the blinding pain, and every oath one swore to keep their tongue silent is broken one by one, by one. Soon the forces at work inside his body grew too powerful to ignore, and Absolon began to cry out, begging for help. His body thrashed violently in his father's grip, forcing the elder to press the child even closer to his body, accepting the strikes and thrashes without a word. His face was no longer calm as Absolon screamed against the pain; the cries had begun to assault him at his very core. He was as well-versed on the final moments of the D'orl virus, and just how little could ever be done for the sufferer.

Desperation took root within the elder as Absolon's thrashing began to grow weaker; his life was slowly, inexorably drained from his body. Absent were any parting words between father and child. All that took root was the child's unending gaze that was fixated upon the elder's face. There the elder saw that his child was no longer of this world, and with this assurance, his resolve crumbled. Absolon's lifeless corpse was laid upon the ground as the elder climbed to his feet, confusion and helplessness flowing within him. He stepped several feet backwards, then fell back upon his knees and placed his head within his hands as he screamed.

There was no direction to which his sadness and rage were attributed to. Blinded by grief and remorse, he could do no more but wail and strike the surface of the planet. Returning to it some small fraction of the pain that clenched his heart. He was Fasul of the Majal, and he had lost his only son.

Lithiom, the planet that first gave birth to the Majal, inhabited a solar system with thirteen separate planets. Spaced as the seventh planet along chronological order away from the brightening star that burned brightly in the center of this system, Lithiom was given a healthy supply of light and darkness during its tenure as the birthplace of the mightiest race in the universe. Time and order were recorded with absent-minded tendencies, leading to contradictions and gaps within the history of their fledgling race. Several eons after their divination into creation, it was only then that they began to wonder at their own roles inside the universe. Technology had given

birth to a new and incredibly fascinating role for the Majal. They were allowed to sail amongst the universe in its entirety, observing and visiting every inhabitable planet they discovered. Thus began their defined role as the overseer's of the universe. Time took on an important role in their society at this stage, as chronicles were stored of planets and creatures from around the universe. Deep catacombs of scripts and tombs were made, detailing different sections of the universe, and whatever dwelt there. They were the pride of the Majal, and if it seemed odd that their pride should come from observing other creatures and not their own, no one ever mentioned it.

The Majal were not a populous species. Even after thousands of eons in existence, their population never exceeded more than several million. This did not create many problems with transference of responsibilities and duties however, as the Majal were gifted with a life span equaling that of a millennia in human terms. Such a grand life span ensured that Majal society would continue to flourish, and would never fall from the path that was laid out so many seasons ago.

Lithia, the capital city of Lithiom, stood as the proliferation of Majal society. The testament to their civilization, Lithia contained the largest population of any city on Lithium, or anywhere else in the entire universe at any given time. The city was the resultant product of generations of work and cultivation; sprawling across the northern continent of Lithium, the Majal revered the city even as they dwelt within it.

As a culture, the Majal studiously paid tribute to their ancestors, believing that the technological advancements they had made should be used to further their roles in the universe, but should not disrupt the delicate balance the Majal themselves existed within in their own habitats. This stretched as far as the Majal could conceivably allow it, without their reverence interfering with their declared duties. So, a series of laws were produced, with the input and consensual agreement of the eldest Majal that belonged to the prestigious families that had established Majal society for eons past.

One of the more controversial laws written and passed, involved the banning of any medical procedure or other form of scientific alterations that may alter Majal genetics, resulting in a mutation within a Majal, thus creating disparity among their species. In some of the outter planets that contained Majal settlements, the D'orl virus had begun to emerge and wreck havoc at the time of the laws passing. Nevertheless, the law passed, and as a result, the D'orl virus ravaged the Majal to the point of wiping out nearly thirty percent of their entire population in the universe. Though many were outraged by this negligence on the part of the Majal elders (particularlyly the younger Majal), the truth was that their existed no known medical procedure that could have stopped the disease from spreading, following the guidelines set or not. This point was often disregarded as many countered that the elders did not know of that fact when they wrote the law. The event struck a bitter chasm between the Majal, as many felt betrayed, particularlyly those that lost family members or close friends to the D'orl virus.

Though the resultant scar had begun to heal among the Majal after many years of resentment, a discovery in a rogue species the Majal encountered would cause the wound to be violently ripped

open.

Whether it was the brightening light or the dream he had been experiencing that awoke him, Fasul would never be able to say for sure. Either way, he was pleased to be free of the nightmare that persisted him every step of his life since that day. Rest became a gamble with every moment, wondering whether he would be tormented by the sight and memory of Absolon.

Inarticulate thoughts seemed to flood his mind as Fasul lay motionless in his bed. Absently he noticed that Thisbe was not beside him, meaning she had likely been ill again that morning.

_Once again she suffers in silence. I am so weakâ€|I can do nothing for her. Listlessly, I falter through my waking hours with the shroud pulled over my eyes. Where can the peace I seek emerge? _

Slowly the urge to rise filled him, and Fasul climbed from his resting place, throwing on the clothes that Thisbe put out after she awoke earlier. Pausing as he ran a hand across his face, Fasul stared at the now empty bedding and sighed deeply. Twenty years by the human calender had passed since Absolon's death, and yet the void between Thisbe and himself was no smaller. Only those who've experienced the pain of losing a child to a slow illness over many seasons would understand the sudden loss of love between those that loved and conceived that child.

Burrowing away his remorse, he stepped out from the bedroom and padded down the narrow hallway to the spiral staircase that led down to the main floor of their home. Checking each of the rooms briefly, Fasul noted that Thisbe was not in the house. He began to worry until he happened to glance out the outer viewing window in the kitchen, and spotted his mate standing away from the home, near the edge of the jutting ground that overlooked the rest of Lithia.

Fasul and Thisbe's home had been a gift from Fasul's father, who passed away at a very early age, living only to his seven hundred and fifty second aging. The home was given to the two mates as a gift when they were joined in the Beol(7) ceremony. Fasul's father perished only seven seasons after their joining, contracting the D'orl strain of virus and passing away shortly thereafter. His mother passed on soon afterwards, taking her own life out of grief for her dead mate.

The D'orl virus had taken much from Fasul, and he was haunted by memories with every step he took inside his home. Thisbe joined her mate in those feelings, which was why she often ventured out of the building and stood on the plateau overlooking the magnificent city below them.

Approaching his mate from behind, Fasul made no attempt to hide his presence as he crossed the distance between their home and the furthest point Thisbe could get from it's walls without having to acquire a Vinol(8) for transportation. He watched her delicate frame as he approached, noticing how her sloping shoulders tensed slightly as she became aware of him. With a hesitant pause, Fasul slipped his hands onto her shoulders, feeling a deep wound in his chest when she tightened her muscles under his touch. He was prepared to remove his

hands, and himself, when Thisbe suddenly relaxed and slumped backwards against Fasul, one of her own hands coming up and falling lightly upon his. Fasul did his best to quell the excitement that filled him as he gripped her hand and felt her squeeze back slightly. Moments such as these were all that he continued to live for, when the barriers they had erected between each other were pulled down.

In the dark days that haunted his present life, Fasul often doubted his love for Thisbe, and believed he may serve the universe better if he were to end his own life. There were times when after a particularly horrifying nightmare involving Absolon, he would stand where he was now in the middle of the night, and gaze down at the distant ground, some three hundred feet below and wonder how much more will power he would need to take that one fateful step. The only thing that stayed his body, keeping it rooted in that spot, was the warmth that flowed into him as Thisbe tilted her curved head against the crook of his neck letting the sensitive skin along her skull rub lovingly against him.

His hands moved down Thisbe's body, passing possessively over her chest, cupping her breasts lightly, slowly moving down to rest them on her stomach, which was curved and swollen with life.

I live for one other reason, Fasul thought. _The universe has given us another chance at life. They have given us another child._

A comforting, companionable silence descended upon the two Majal as they watched the deep red star that lighted their home planet rise from beneath the horizon. Fasul let his hands wander occasionally, testing the strength of Thisbe's ass and thighs with his hands, delighting himself when she shivered and moaned against him. No matter how far he wandered, his hands returned to her swollen stomach, reassuring himself that there was indeed life dwelling within. It had been nearly seven months since he last touched Thisbe, and his arousal was sparked with fervent desire.

With considerable effort he calmed himself, mentally exuding the fact that at the stage of pregnancy Thisbe was currently in, the act of mating would prove difficult, and perhaps even painful for his mate and the child she carried. Those thoughts calmed him, and he brought his hands back up to shoulders, kneading them gently, working the knots that had developed within them. The moans of pleasure that came from Thisbe now seemed to be even more arousing than when he had been testing her swollen and sore breasts.

Time passed, and as the star passed completely free into the morning sky, Thisbe and Fasul returned to their silence for a short time. However, Fasul soon broke the silence, hesitating beforehand in the same manner he had halted himself when he first touched Thisbe earlier.

"I dreamt of him last night," he admitted softly. The silence became oppressing as he waited for Thisbe to respond. He would not have been surprised if she simply walked away; that she chose to answer in response, surprised him greatly.

"I know," Thisbe said, just as softly. Fasul's wandering hands found her stomach once again, pushing slightly against the swollen area and feeling the slight movements of the young Majal that dwelt

within.

"Not a day passes where I do not worry that this child will share Absolon's fate."

"I know."

"Do you blame me?" he asked suddenly. Thisbe paused for a long instant before replying.

"Clarify yourself, Fasul," she said. "Do I blame you for what?"

"For everything," stammered Fasul, his tone mournful.

"For many seasons I did, yes," Thisbe admitted breathlessly. "I blamed you for Absolon's death, I blamed you for the D'orl virus, and I blamed you for the space that had grown between us. Anything in the universe, I blamed it all on you. I hated you for so long."

"I blamed myself for everything as well," Fasul spoke bitterly. "And I loved you for every second that I loathed you for your repulsion of me."

"Hate begets hate," Thisbe whispered, pressing her lips lightly against one of Fasul's hands. "There is no time for accusations anymore."

"Yes," Fasul agreed sadly. Once more a comfortable silence encompassed them as the bustling city beneath them began to stir. The noise of several Vinol passing by their home on the heavily entrenched roads nearby broke their serenity, and Fasul slowly, regrettably released Thisbe from his arms.

"You're going to the Palintheum(9) today?" Thisbe asked morosely.

"The issue of the Flood is still before the elders," Fasul said, "Geul is reassured with my presence alongside him and the other elders. He has asked me to submit my own account to the Palintheum today so that it may be on record."

"Why would he ask you to do that?" Thisbe asked, genuinely confused. "The Palintheum records are used to gather the thoughts of the elder Majal that are about to pass on. You are still young Fasul."

"I know that well," Fasul confirmed, his thick fingers tracing a small pattern along the sleeve of Thisbe's dress.

"Geul knows of our child," he continued, "And I believe he thinks that my position on the matter may change once you give birth."

"Will it?" Thisbe asked, and Fasul could not help but hear her hopeful tone.

"No," he replied, forcing the steely notes into his voice. "The elder families crafted the laws that govern our society for a reason, and I do not believe that we are meant to judge them, casting the laws that do not suit us aside at our own pleasure. The implementation of foreign genetics into our own physical corporeal bodies is considered

a great sin amongst our people, and one we must never allow to occur."

"You will never change your mind, will you?" Thisbe asked, then continued without waiting for his reply. "Majal children are the only age demographic that are susceptible to the D'orl virus these days Fasul; have you given thought to our child? What if she contracts the disease, like Absolon; will your feelings remain the same?"

"I could never answer such a question hypothetically," Fasul said desperately. "Losing Absolon was so very painful, and I tell myself at every moment that if there had been something, anything that might have saved him, that I would allow its use within a heartbeat. But that is my grief, and my emotions speaking. The Flood DNA we've extracted from that parasitical species is untested. There is no telling what might happen to a Majal that receives the treatment."

"What if it was proven? What if there were no side effects? Would you still deny that child the life entitled to them?"

"I do not know," Fasul answered truthfully. "My love for you and Absolon, and the love I all ready feel for this child that is not yet born of this world; it is boundless. My faith in the elders is strong, but I do not know if it is stronger then my love and devotion to our family. Please do not ask me to make such a decision."

"It is easier to look away from your future, Fasul, than to set your heart and your mind to the task of deciding what you might do in certain situations. The past exists for a reason, turn away from it, and you shall be cursed to share it's doom."

The voice belonged to neither Thisbe nor Fasul and they turned, somewhat surprised to stare at the Majal that stood only a few paces behind them.

"Enorym," Fasul spoke softly, his eyes narrowing fractionally as the younger Majal bowed almost obnoxiously from the waist. He was clothed in a tunic and linen that appeared to be threads imported from one of the Deadric Colonies(10). His face shared many of the attributes given to the Majal that once inhabited the southern continent, Gildrea, of Lithium. The skin was drawn taut over his skull, making his face appear far thinner than it actually was. The light-toned skin on his chest was offset by the deepening rouge that colored the powerful muscles of his back down to his lower thighs. Enorym was a mystery to Fasul, at times he could appear thoughtful and kind, while others he would be menacing and spiteful. His eyes were small, and gave the appearance that they could never be deceived, no matter how big or small the lie put before them.

"I apologize if I have disturbed you," Enorym said as his eyes glanced briefly at Thisbe, and Fasul realized that his arms were still wrapped around his mate's body. Slowly, so as to not appear ashamed over how he had been possessively holding Thisbe, Fasul removed his arms, briefly wondering if he should be annoyed at Enorym's interruption, or thankful that he had stalled Thisbe's relentless questioning of issues he could not rightly deal with.

"It is early, Enorym, and you do not often make house calls at this residence," Fasul said, letting his tone convey his reproach to the

younger Majal.

"An offense I am trying to right, my friend," Enorym smiled, and Fasul wondered whether it was done out of merriment or malice. "I did not think that I would surprise you both. I sent a message earlier, did you not receive it?"

"Yes, of course," Thisbe spoke, the first time since Enorym announced his presence. "I saw it when I awoke, it must have slipped my mind."

"I apologize nonetheless," Enorym said graciously, inclining his head slightly in regard to Thisbe's forgetting him. He then turned to Fasul and his smile dimmed fractionally. "It was my intention to accompany you to the Palinthium today. You are indeed going, yes?"

I wonder how much of him wishes I would say no?

"Yes, I'm going, and I accept your offer," Fasul replied. Inclining his head slightly he met Thisbe's eyes, and with a communicative nod he bid her goodbye.

Enorym's eyes followed him as he stepped away from Thisbe and moved towards the other Majal. Wordlessly, Enorym led the way around Fasul's home out onto the small section of roadway on which a Vinol was parked. They clambered inside, and as Enorym entered their destination into the transports module center, the silence between them was broken.

"What is it you wished to speak with me about?" Fasul asked, feeling it better to get Enorym's true intention out in the open first off.

If Enorym was surprised at Fasul's bluntness, it showed not in the least.

"You have been given the floor at the hearing today, correct?" questioned Enorym, then continued after Fasul nodded. "Geul is having you submit your account onto permanent record so that it may be read into evidence at any given time. That is highly unusual, and many of the elders do not understand the purpose behind this decision. Some believe that you have evidence that may be integral to the overall hearing."

"And you have been sent to retrieve any confirmation or denial on my part?" Fasul asked, his voice incredulous. Enorym watched him for a moment as their transport pulled away from Fasul's home and rushed down the roadway towards the bustling city of Lithia.

"Yes, many of the elders believed that because of our relationship, you may be more forthcoming than you otherwise might have been."

Fasul could not contain his snort of indignation as he shook his head in amazement.

"I have not seen your family since my son's passing. Regardless, you were away in the Deadric Colonies when your mate passed on. Watching over your children was no burden, and it did not make us

friends."

"No," Enorym agreed, "It did not. The pain of losing one so close, to a disease that should have been erased nearly thousands of years ago, that is what made us friends. We share that pain, you and I."

Fasul chose silence as his response, inhaling deeply while casting his attention to outside of their transport, where the roads leading into Lithia were packed with other Vinol heading into the bustling city.

A city of deathâ€¦ My kin stand upon the edge of a great rise, they keep their gaze rooted to the sky, unable to see how close they now standâ€¦so close to the end. In this city of lights, there is no life; nothing exists except for the wayward souls that have not realized that they are the waking dead.

Enorym is ruled by his emotions. His loss for his mate, and the fear he holds in his heart for his children is what drove him to the other side. Though I loath him because of it, he is true to himself, and I hate him for that because his truth makes my own hesitation more prevalent. He deserves no scorn from me, lest I wish to become any less of what I once was.

"I'm sorry, Enorym," said Fasul. "These days I am often troubled, and I have been rude to you. I consider you a great friend, and I love your children as if they were my own. It has been too long since I last saw them."

Enorym smiled gently as their transport pulled into the sparsely populated parking station outside of the Palintheum. The towering dome cast a shadow over them as the Vinol finally stopped, and the two Majal stepped free of the transport.

"You may tell the elders that as far as my knowledge contains, I hold no key to the success of either side in this debate. My account will show whatever it is that my heart contains, no more, no less."

"A great friend indeed," Enorym laughed, naturally. "The debate will last long today I fear, and I imagine much will be said before you make your statements. You tell me nothing, and yet I understand everything. When the hearing convenes for the day, I shall find you once more my friend."

Parting then, the two Majal approached the Palintheum bathed in darkness, beneath its mighty shadow. The structure was the focal point of their society, and on this day, it would prove to be the ending of their people.

The Palintheum itself was constructed many years before either Fasul or Enorym ever entered into existence. Built using the base metal compound, materia prima, found natively on Lithiom's surface, the architectural masterpiece was a work of art in the eyes of many Majal. Magnificent, metallic white claws of divine glory appeared to stretch out from the ground and encompass the large oval dome that strutted out from the ground some several hundred feet. Reaching up, the divine talons stretched over the dome in an arching reach, creating a seemingly protective shell over it. It was as if the

Palintheum were held in the grasp of a God.

For so magnificent a structure, the interior of the Palintheum was drab and plain in appearance to many. Seven wide corridors that led into the court from the exterior were positioned equally around the dome, and all entrances were often needed during the crisis that had swallowed up the Majal during the last few seasons.

Fasul was cajoled and bumped frequently as he passed through the tunnel, allowing the illuminating light which had no source of origin to ward off any irritation that lingered within him. He would need to keep his mind clear whilst undergoing the trial set for him this day. Any tribulations he might face would only be exasperated by feeling discomfort over the thousands of thoughts that run through his skull.

_The atmosphere is tense, it seems as if everyone is at their breaking point, _Fasul mused inwardly. _I cannot blame them. This debate has gone on for so long, neither side has any understanding of what they are defending any longer._

Emerging from the narrow corridor, Fasul instantly caught sight of Geul, who stood with several of the other elder Majal that positioned themselves on this particular side of the Palintheum. After a moment Fasul finally caught Geul's eye, and responded to the elder's wave with a moment of trepidation.

So over swarmed with my thoughts was I, that I did not stop to wonder for myself, just why Geul has asked for my submission to the court records. It is indeed an odd course of action, but I trusted in his judgment at first, and chose to keep any pondering to myself. Is the truth something so trivial as what I suggested to Thisbe? Surely my love for my unborn kin is deep, but I have yet to feel any guilt from traveling to this court every day, and sitting myself with those that would see the Majal stay as they are, even if it means allowing another Gray Season to pass.

"I am pleased to see you, Fasul," Geul said as he wrapped an affectionate, if forceful, arm around Fasul's shoulders. "Come, I'll introduce you to some of the other elders."

Three others stood waiting for him. Gilidor, a Majal of nearly a thousand years old, had a face that Fasul mused must have once been quite rugged. Age had softened his features however, and the once stiff skin was now sunken and weak, so much so that Fasul found himself wondering how the elder managed to see. The other two elders appeared to be related in some way, and Geul revealed them to in fact be brothers. Halpin and Nalhin, both could not be any older than a few hundred years old, making Fasul curious as to why Geul referred to them as elders. Typically that title was not bestowed upon a Majal until they were in the last term of their life, or if the remaining elders in their family line had passed on. More than likely, the two brothers' parents had passed away, likely victims of the D'orl virus during the Gray Seasons.

It was rare however, to see those personally involved with the D'orl virus on the side of those against further Flood DNA experimentation. Fasul did not question their motives like the other Majal did, for he himself knew the moralistic questions that likely plagued the two brothers at every waking moment.

"I cannot tell you how grateful we are that you have accepted Geul's request," Gilidor spoke. "There has been much apprehension amongst our people in how to approach this issue now that we are in the later stages. Putting forth the account of one such as yourself, who has felt the bitter pain of loss, yet stoically remains on the side that desires to heed the laws that our ancestors laid out for us, will surely become a real bargaining tool that we may use."

Flattery. I am being praised by these people, and I do not care to know why. Do they look at the death of my beloved child as a blessing? The guilt and heartache that shall forever plague my dreams, is that something that they believe is a necessity?

"Please, I deserve no praise," Fasul responded. "I do not waver from my own beliefs, and it is only a mere coincidence that they fall in line with what our elders have decreed to be law."

Momentary glimpses of surprise flittered across the other Majal, and Fasul recognized those expressions, and the weight they carried.

The looks of one who realizes he does not stand before a fool. There is regret and despair in their faces, for the weak and stupid are easy to mold and control in order to serve whatever purpose they have engineered for me.

The uncomfortable moment was ended when Geul stepped forward and placed his arm around the shoulders of Fasul once more.

"Time is short Fasul, I shall take you down to the floor where we shall prepare for your account," the elder Majal explained as he led Fasul away.

The procedure for making an account before the assembled inside the Palinthium was not as easy as one might think. To guard against unsubstantiated testimony, and false truths, the Majal deigned with giving his or her account on a particular topic before the Palinthium would be situated within a cerebral chamber, strapped into a miniature dome that was situated beneath the floor of the assembly. On occasions where it was needed, the dome could be called to rise from its depths, earning it the nickname "Ashion", an obstructive use of preexisting words within the central Majal dialect. The Majal dialect would be considered an agglutinative language, as it was mainly based around morphemes being joined together, though the races of Majal that initially were birthed on the northern continents of Lithium spoke a more poetic form, that took much longer to say things, yet often sounded nicer to those listening. The "Niantic" form, as it was called at this stage of Majal development, was often used in plays and other forms of phonetic entertainment as it lent a sophisticated and alluring sound to the dialogue.

Ashion was a melding of an ancient phrase, "Aisin hesina ionma ni" which when translated became, "From darkness, come perception". When said in the Niantic form however, the phrase became, "Taken from darkness, shall perception be birthed". The Ashion was aptly named, for it was perhaps the most intrusive creation to ever emerge from

the Majal technological advancements. The machine would literally pull free the memories, thoughts, and images from the consciousness of whatever creature it was connected to.

It was not unheard of for a soul to be apprehensive when placed within its unseeing interior. The thriving hum of the equipment was the only sound heard, and the dome itself was thick, and incapable of projecting images of what was carrying on outside of its small shell. Though there was no physical pain, the host would be subjected to whatever memories the Ashion was sent to retrieve and display. For some it meant reliving painful moments.

This was what worried Fasul as the dome was closed and locked from the outside. He did not know what areas of his past could be of any use to the Palintheim assembly, and though he dared not to imagine it, he felt the trickle of fear that the others would seek to confirm his convictions. His trepidation came not from worries that his morals were not up to the task of close scrutiny but instead were birthed from his belief that memories relating to Absolon may be unearthed.

I spend every moment thinking of him, for these rare times when I am free of that burden, I cannot allow them to delve so deep into my past.

Fasul was, however, all ready placed within the core of Ashion. While he was not strapped down in any way, the dome had been closed, and there appeared to be no apparent method of opening it from the inside.

"Geul! Do not begin this process! I must speak with you! Geul!"

His shouts earned him no response, aside from the hum of the interior growing in volume.

Blast! I have accented to be their puppet for this cause, but I will not give them free reign over my mind!

With a cry of frustration did Fasul throw himself against the encapsulated walls that held him within Ashion. His efforts, though great, were wasted. The dome did not budge, and from the exterior did no help come.

The sounds generated from Ashion were strong enough that Fasul could feel the vibrations of sound as they passed through his body. Pulsations through the dome grew in intensity, and Fasul began to fear for his life. The explanations given to him by Geul spoke nothing of this.

Light flooded the interior, blinding him as an unseen force shoved against the Majal's body. There was only a moment to consider what it was that struck him before Fasul impacted the shell of the dome. His head cracked soundly, causing his already impaired vision to blur and darken. The world was swimming around him as inertia gave way, and his body slumped against the ground. Blinding light bathed everything Fasul could perceive at that moment, and in an instant, it was replaced with darkness.

Awareness and light were foreign entities to him during this time.
Floating amongst images of his past. Images of his future.

Fasul was trapped within a world of darkness, but had no
understanding of that fact.

So terrible a thing it is, to be a prisoner, yet have no
preconception of your
imprisonment.

****GLOSSARY:****

>
 (1) Kyl'shi - The older age demographic in Majal
society. Think of it as becoming a teenager, only you actually have
to do worthy acts to gain that recognition.**

****(2) Gail** - The family heirloom. A coat of arms. An ancient weapon.
Any of those things could be considered a Gail. It's simply a relic
from family lines that is passed down from generation to generation.
Oddly a big deal with the Majal.**

****(3) D'orl** - You should've figured it out by now. Its a viral
disease that attacks the Majal species exclusively. Children and the
elderly are the most susceptible.**

****(4) Gavis** - An avian type of animal, indeginous to the planet
Lithiom.**

****(5) Gray Seasons** - Considered at one time to be the most devastating
moment in Majal culture. Of course, I'm sure we can all come up with
one other event that just might have been worse.**

****(6) Lithiom** - Birthplace of the Majal. Quite majestic too. Beats
old dirty Earth any day.**

****(7) Beol Ceremony** - The Majal equivalent to a marriage ceremony,
only with a lot less people, and no need of a minister.**

****(8) Vinol** - Personal transport vehicles. More attractive than our
modern motar vehicles, and one millionth of the pollution output.
Those Majal sure are crafty.**

****(9) Palintheum** - Think of it as an ancient colosseum, only designed
with craftsmanship thousands of years ahead of our own. The Majal are
boring though, and used it as a simple poilitical debating
area.**

****(10) Deadric Colonies** - A series of uninhabited planets that the
Majal often use for natural resources.

>
> ...<p>

****Author's Notes:** This is just part one, and I cut it shorter than I
normally would have. Part Two will be super long, either look forward
to that, or start crying now. For those of you that are still around,
please give me your thoughts.**

27. The Forerunner Chronicles Part Two

****The End of a War****

****Forerunner Chronicles Part Two****

****The Redemption****

Awakening as if from a deep sleep, Fasul's eyes seemed to burn against the haggard light that shone down upon his body. His mind was hazy and unclear, creating a disorienting façade about his movements. The muscles in his arms refused to cooperate with him, content with lying limply against his side. With a swollen tongue, Fasul's words were slurred and unclear even to him. A mouth parched beyond comprehension screamed out loudest amongst the many pains and concerns alighting his body and mind.

There must have been a kind soul near him that understood his most immediate need, for a small cup was produced, and a warm liquid found its way into Fasul's mouth. Even his head refused to move, and so the majority of the offering spluttered over his lips and down his face. Had he been more aware of himself, Fasul would have been deeply embarrassed over such a slovenly display. Etiquette concerns were galaxies away at the moment however, and he greedily drank down the sweetly warm liquid. Once satisfied, he attempted to communicate once more to his unseen assistant, but a wave of exhaustion appeared to grip him, and consciousness left him immediately.

What felt like an instant later, he awoke once more, though his mind told him the time that passed was greater than it felt for the lighting in the room was now significantly darker. Comprehension came to him much quicker this time, and as he attempted to lift himself from his prone position, his ears detected voices nearby.

"The disorientation will clear shortly, Fasul," someone close by said.

Fasul struggled to lift his head to see who was speaking, but his body was incredibly weak. His limbs were immobile; even his fingers remained motionless despite his earnest efforts. A grunt of exertion left him and he collapsed back into the bed, feeling as if he had competed in a daylong race. Haggard was his breath, and Fasul was aware enough to be confounded over how exhausted he was from simply trying to lift himself into a sitting position. So tired was he, that when something was placed over his nose and mouth, sealing his ability to breathe, the resistance he put forth was pathetic despite the desperation and panic that set itself within his mind.

"Calm yourself," that same nearby individual ordered. "This will assist you with your breathing."

There was no alternative for Fasul so he attempted to rest his mind, and an instant afterwards, what felt like a fine mist was shot into his mouth and nose. Taking a deep breath out of panic, the mist was taken into his body. Expecting himself to break into a coughing fit at any moment, Fasul stilled his breath.

"You may breathe now Fasul, your body should feel somewhat rejuvenated, though I warn you that there will still be some disorientation."

Whatever had been placed against his face was now removed, and Fasul brought his arms up to his face by reflex. He was astonished then, his limbs now moved effortlessly whereas a moment ago they felt heavier than a Supernovae. Further testing proved that his legs were capable of movement as well. They were stiff, but he could certainly move them and that was a vast improvement.

With concerns over his physical body subsided, Fasul decided to address his next concern.

"Where am I?"

There was a momentary pause, and had Fasul been more coherent he may have understood the meaning behind the silence. The same disembodied voice was the one that finally answered his query.

"Sa'yene Medicinal Center."

I am in Denthil? That is over three hundred light years from Lithiaâ€|

"Why am I here?" Fasul asked next. The fog that filled his mind was beginning to lift, and he was regaining cognizance. Curiosity now itched at his being.

Once more silence greeted his inquiry for a short time. When the doctor replied, it was not in direct response to his question.

"Tell me, Fasul, what is it that you last remember? Before you awoke within this room?"

Fasul strained his mind. The question seemed rudimentary, yet his memory seemed fragmented. Bits and pieces of scenery, emotions, and pain seemed to reflect before his minds eye, and yet he could not piece them together. Torrents of fear lashed out at him, and the confusion he felt soon dissolved into fear. His body must not have been the only thing harmed, something had happened to his mind as well.

Perhaps the doctor saw the frantic look on Fasul's face, for he adopted a far gentler tone.

"It is alright, you have emerged from a deep sleep after all. Your mind will not be as coherent as you might recall it being," the elder Majal soothed. He disappeared from Fasul's view as he ran a critical eye over the many pieces of equipment that were monitoring his vital signs.

Confronted with a thousand questions in his mind, Fasul inquired on what he felt most important.

"How long have I been here?"

The answer, this time, was far more decisively delivered than the previous response.

"Three years, seventeen months, and twenty-five days, counting today."

The answer came not from the elderly Majal that was in his line of view. It originated off to the side and Fasul twisted his head about, and saw that Enorym was standing only a few feet from his bedside. The young Majal met Fasul's surprised look and smiled almost sadly, while Fasul sputtered momentarily as he searched for words.

"Enorym—why are you here?"

"I come almost every day," his young friend replied easily, pulling a small chair close and sitting upon it. He watched Fasul intently, as if gauging what affect his words were having upon him.

Fasul was no fool, he had heard and registered Enorym's early proclamation, but he had refused to believe it. To have spent nearly four years in this hospital was an absurd notion, since he could not recall ever waking inside of it at any previous moment. Stretching his mind, Fasul attempted to remember what happened before he awoke in this room, but it was to no avail; his memories appeared in shades and distorted images. Faces and places that seemed to strike a varying degree of emotion from his soul. Sadness, longing, apprehension, depression—and fear. The last image that stayed with him was one of terror, trapped within the tight shell of the Ashion.

"The Ashion—" Fasul trailed off. He saw the pained expression that crossed over Enorym's face at the mention of the device, and suddenly everything was clear.

"Something went wrong when I was inside. Everything that Geul explained to me beforehand, none of it ever happened."

Enorym was troubled by something, or so it appeared to Fasul, who was watching his friend's face earnestly. The younger Majal was having trouble forcing his eyes to meet Fasul's. Finally with what seemed to be a determined effort, Enorym cast his gaze level with the incapacitated Fasul.

"It was sabotage, the extremist wing of our faction somehow gained access to the Palinthium during the night beforehand. They disrupted several of the root protocols, and inserted an artificial memory stream into the core. As soon as it was activated, and a host entered, their efforts were rewarded. Using the host as a bypass, the saboteurs created a false account, which contained thousands of images portraying Majal in the throes of the D'orl virus. Recordings of screams and video recordings of children as they died during the final stages of the virus' work inside their bodies."

Enorym swallowed and took his eyes off Fasul, directing his attention to the ground.

I feel sick. To think that the dissidents would go so far just to prove their point, how far has our race fallen?

A thought occurred to Fasul, it hadn't been widespread that the Ashion was going to be put to use, so how did the saboteurs know that the ancient device would be employed?

As if reading his mind, Enorym spoke: "Geul betrayed you. He never intended to use you for their cause; you were to be the catalyst for

the beginning of a revolution."

The sickness brewing within his abdomen grew stronger, and Fasul groaned audibly as his mind became numbed.

"I'm sorry, Fasul," Enorym pleaded, "By the time I realized what was happening it was too late, the procedure had begun, and the Palinthum was thrown into chaos. Several Majal descended on the Ashion and attempted to remove you, but nothing short of a cataclysm could possibly rend the device open before it finishes it's course."

Enorym's words registered but carried no weight, for Fasul was feeling impossibly sick. His vision was blurred and every incremental movement caused him to become severely nauseous. The doctor, who was still inside the room, approached him and placed his hands on the sides of Fasul's face, and gazed intently into his eyes; studiously observing the glazed cover that encompassed them.

"I believe that is enough reminiscing for today," the doctor announced. "He will need to rest now."

Enorym seemed remiss, but acceded to the doctor's words, and with a brief parting gesture he left along with the doctor, leaving Fasul inside his medicinal chamber. He spent several minutes struggling with the overwhelming sense of distress brewing within him before the many different medical observatory machines he was connected with began to stir, pumping medicinal fluids into his body. In a few moments his anguish faded, and the hazy feeling returned to his body with force. Before he fell into unconsciousness, a brief thought flittered clearly across his mind.

Should this be nothing more than a fitful dream, I will be glad. If it is true, and all other moments of sanity in my life are in fact conjurations of my mind, then let this sleep claim my life, so that I should never awaken again.

Unfettered by dreams, Fasul awoke from the brief period of refreshing freedom, and was dismayed to see that everything had not been a fabrication built from his mind. The same drab, sterile ceiling of his room inside the medical facility greeted him. There was nobody else in the room with him, and Fasul noted somewhat relieved, that his body now seemed fully articulate in it's movements. A heavy scent seemed to fill the room, and at once he realized that he was the source of it. Recalling the words of Enorym, he surmised that had he truly been a resident at this facility for over three years, his body had likely not received a proper washing for some time.

So, filled with the desire to move, Fasul cast off the heavy sheets that covered his body and rose, realizing immediately that he was completely nude. Though perturbed he cast aside the concerns.

After I have washed away the stench of immobility, I shall concern myself with clothing. For now I shall attempt to discover the whereabouts of a cleansing room.

Exiting his room, Fasul found himself in a long corridor, decorated

in the same depressing dullness as his room had. Devoid of life, the dimly lit hallway did little to move the dark veil that was pulled over his eyes. The empty echo of his feet padding against the cold metallic ground was the only background noise as Fasul fell into his burgeoning thoughts.

I am no fool. What transpired when I last awoke was no dream. Enorym told me of Geul's betrayal, and of my own fall into a deep sleep for many years. I was used as a tool by a manipulator, and my life was nearly lost because of it. Why then, do I not think of revenge? I have lost so much time, my beloved Thisbe will have given birth to my second child by now. My chance at redemption was lost. That child will have lived a life without me, and I shall be a stranger to her eyes. They have stolen that from me.

Where is my rage?

Where is my hate?

Was my soul claimed whilst I slept? I prayed for such a thing, but has it indeed come to pass? Is this form I am in nothing more than a husk; an empty shell devoid of a soul? Where then, has my spirit fled? Has it been taken beyond my reach, to the land of the dead, where it shall reunite with dear Absolon? Or is the other way around, and I now find myself walking down this barren walkway, towards a destination that I shall never reach? Is this the home of the Dead?

Death, have you claimed my soul? Whence did you come, and where have you taken me? Is this all that death will give me; a bereft being, eternally damned to wander alone? Has God created this world for those that have lost his favor? The elders spoke in days long passed that God's eyes could pierce even the most hate-filled souls, and find the good within them. Tell me God, why then, am I within this Hell? Am I possessed of no gentle spirit? Was the father that wept while holding the broken body of his child not worthy of your infinite pity?

Did I fall from your graces when I chose not to accept the horrid words of the separatists that extolled the virtues of merging the Flood forms with our own bodies? If we were created from your breast, then why should we seek to alter our forms, be they as simple as creating defenses against the horrors that you yourself also built? Did my moralistic views not match up with your own?

Hmph, what a petty God you must be.

The infinite hallway was anything but, and Fasul soon reached its end. The lack of any other doors along the route troubled him, but he was pleased to see at least a single doorway. Stepping through, he entered what appeared to be some kind of interface center. An interactive module sat at the far end of the room, which Fasul noted to be empty of anything else. Not even a simple painting decorated the walls.

"I should like to speak with whoever was in charge of decorating this facility," Fasul mused to himself as he approached the module. At the sound of his voice the screen came to life, and an emotionless, artificial voice spoke to him.

"I am Fohn, state your purpose."

Fasul noticed with interest that the spoken statement was also written across the screen. Most likely for any patients that were deaf.

"I am looking for the washing facilities, I believe I am in heavy need of a cleansing," Fasul spoke conversationally. It felt like it had been some time since he last spoke fluently with another being.

"Fasul, Patient Eight-Three-Six, voice print recognized. You are under Classification Seven, movement is restricted, please return to your room and await a physician. One will be with you in thirteen hours."

"Unfortunately I have no intention of returning to my room, Fohn, so once again I must ask you, where are the cleansing facilities."

There was a short pause before the module responded.

"Patient Eight-Three-Six, you are ordered to return to your room, either do so or attendants will be called to escort you back to your room."

Fasul may have felt amused by the module's mannerisms, but he was in no mood to argue with an artificial entity.

"Of course, my apologies, I shall do so immediately."

Doing the opposite of what he stated, Fasul stepped away from the module and headed for the closed door that stood off to the side. As he neared, the door activated and parted, allowing him entrance. When he stepped through, Fohn spoke once more.

"Patient Eight-Three-Six, disobeying orders. Attendants alerted, apprehension imminent."

Sighing remorsefully to himself, Fasul mused, "Would only I have lived in an age when such idiotic inventions had never been made."

The hallway that led away from the interactive module was of a different form as the one that led into it. The lighting seemed brighter, the air was cleaner, and Fasul noted that there were multiple entryways leading away. He recalled with confusion that the lengthy hallway that came from his own room had been empty of all but the single doorway he had used.

Am I considered a hazard to those within this facility? To think that I would be isolated in such a manner, from what Enorym told me I was unconscious for nearly four years. There is something deeper here, but I what it is, I do not know. Perhaps they feared that I would be enraged when I awoke, and learned of Geul's betrayal. How unfortunate then, that I feel nothing but sadness for his actions. I have lived through enough torment that I know of the futility that anger creates. Revenge benefits nothing, only the ignorant fool searches for it, and only the truly foolish attempts to carry it out.

The many entranceways proved troublesome for Fasul. While he did not have any problems with his current state of dress, he did not wish to be seen by others. He did have a sense of propriety after all. So he was forced to approach the doorways from the side, and peak his head in, attempting to deduce whether they would lead him to his desired destination.

Once again however, the inept designer of the Sa'yene Medical Center impeded his progress. Each hallway was designed identical, and there existed no identification for where each corridor led. Despite being somewhat carefree at the moment, Fasul had no intention of becoming lost, so he continued along the same straight hallway. Wanting to shift his thoughts from the depression that seemed to be clawing away at his every fiber, Fasul attempted to understand the architecture of the building he was in. He had learned of the Sa'yene Medical Center back when Absolon had first been diagnosed with the D'orl virus. Thisbe and Fasul had discussed for a long time over what the best course of action would be. While the Sa'yene facility was touted as the most advanced, it was also incredibly far from their home in Lithia. In the end, Absolon had made the decision, not wanting to venture so far from his home, the child had begged his parents to be admitted to the medical facilities on his home world.

The facility seemed unnaturally large to Fasul, now that he was walking within it. While the Majal for a time had nearly been eradicated by the D'orl, that was some time ago, and in these days the Majal feared no disease. The necessity of this facility seemed dimmed in times of relative peace, though Fasul admitted to himself that while he was within the confines of his coma, some other form of disease or strife may have struck the Majal population.

Stopping momentarily, Fasul found himself standing in front of a large window. A wasteland of barren rock and dead earth stared back at him. Denthil was a planet empty of habitable atmosphere. It was a desolate rock, many years ago it was an ocean of flames and magma, before it finally died out, and became what Fasul was surveying. The White Dwarf, as the source of light and heat inside this solar system was called, was supplying light to the other side of Denthil, and all that Fasul saw was covered in darkness.

I am not content with this. Why have I been imprisoned here? I wish to see Thisbe, and my unborn child. I long to know if they are well, and if I am still remembered. Enorym has not forgotten me, but his presence is one of guilt. We are friends, and yet he was unable to assist me when his compatriots sought to end my life through sabotage. I do not blame him, but guilt does not come from blame, it comes from an operable conscious, and he is a creature that knows the pain of loss. I am sure he has done all he can for Thisbe and my child. Still, I yearn for Thisbe's touch; how cruel it is that the day that I finally reconciled with her, that I would be torn away once more.

A thrumming came from behind him, and Fasul turned quickly to see two mechanical drones floating towards him. They were not foreign entities to Fasul, their oval design and single red eye that supplied the drones with vision, were a familiar sight to him. Often the drones were employed as surveillance tools at the Palinthium, especially during the debate over the Flood. He presumed then, that these were no different, and chose not to react as they drew

close.

"I surrender," Fasul said, mockingly, raising his arms in a show of amusement. The machines continued towards him unabated, as he predicted. Once they were within a few feet however, Fasul noticed a distinct characteristic on these drones that hadn't been present on the surveillance drones from before. From the bottom was a small fixed metal arm, which had a syringe affixed at the end. The needlepoint was directed forwards, which incidentally was pointing directly at Fasul.

Faced with two choices, either waiting to see if the drones really intended to attack, or attempting to run away from them. At the moment, he was not of the opinion that he needed any more rest. As such, he found himself pounding down the hallway, his bare feet slapping against the cold ground fully aware that the drones were giving chase. He hadn't availed himself on the specs of the drones, and because of that he did not know how fast they could move. A short glance told him enough. The distance between himself and the drones from when he first decided to run had not changed. They were keeping up effortlessly.

The drones had the advantage in that they were mechanical, but Fasul was capable of abstractness, and therefore could use an unpredictable strategy to evade them. For the first time the maze of corridors would work in his favor. Darting down the hallways randomly, Fasul slowly gained a fair distance from the drones, but he knew that it was simply their speed hampering them. He'd seen enough demonstrations to know that they were capable of tracing a single heat signature from over a mile away. If he were going to lose them for good, he would either need to incapacitate them, or put an immovable barrier between himself, and the drones.

For a time, Fasul was lucky when choosing his path. His random darting down different corridors had yet to lead him into a dead end, but as he rounded a corner and chose to enter a somewhat large corridor, he found himself facing a single door. Cursing fate momentarily, he bounded through the door, twisting around once inside. Luck was against him again; there was nothing visible that could possibly lock the door. Cursing once more, Fasul turned haggardly and glanced about; he was in some form of storage room. The hallway he had run down before entering this room had been long; should he try to return, the drones would be upon him quickly. If escape was impossible, that meant he would be forced to halt the drones progress through physical means.

As a storage facility, Fasul noted that the room failed horribly. It was nearly empty. The small space was filled with nothing but stale air and a few metal bars likely there for any elder Majal that may need to use them for support along the walls. They were positioned above the small enclosures near the bottom of the walls that could be lifted and have items stored inside. Without much forethought, Fasul lifted his leg and brought it crashing down against the support bar. The pain was glancing along his leg, but he ignored it and once again slammed the heel of his foot against the bar, noticing with approval that he had knocked it somewhat loose. He gripped it tightly with his hands and tore it free, at precisely the moment when the door opened.

"And here I thought I was going to find you searching for clothing,"

the same doctor from the previous time said. He shook his head remorsefully and placed his fists on his hip.

"Your not going to come at me with that thing are you?"

"That depends," Fasul said warily. "Are you going to try and put me to sleep again?"

"You act like that's some kind of offense," the doctor said amusedly. "You have my assurances though, so long as you put that thing down, and put on some clothes, I won't let those drones have their way with you."

Cautiously, Fasul placed the makeshift weapon on the ground. The doctor smiled placidly and turned, beckoning for Fasul to follow him. As the still clothes-less Fasul stepped from the room, the doctor was waiting. He extended his arm and handed Fasul a piece of clothing. As he unfurled it, he realized it was a single dress piece, something typically seen on some of the older members of the Majal species. Fasul looked up at the doctor, who shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"Our cliental do not typically wear much else."

"I see," Fasul replied slowly. He donned the dress piece, acknowledging that at the very least it was easy to move around in.

"Now that we've gotten everything back under control here, may I ask what it was you felt so important that you had to evade and then threaten to destroy our med-drones?" the doctor asked. "Sure you realize that your life was never in danger; the drones carry a simple relaxant that will dull any pain you might be feeling. Its simply a measure we take to ensure potentially violent patients are safe before we approach them."

"You consider me potentially violent?" Fasul asked, surprised. The doctor tilted his head as they began to walk out of the corridor, and stared deadpan at him.

"Perhaps you forget that moments ago I found you looking crazed, naked, and wielding a weapon."

"I have no wish to be treated like a prisoner," Fasul spoke, undeterred. "I have done nothing wrong, and I do not deserve such treatment. I was merely looking for some cleaning facilities so that I might begin to feel as if I were normal again."

"The precautions we have taken are for your own benefit. We have been monitoring you for years, Fasul. What happened in the Ashion is not something that you can simply ignore."

"I am not so petty as to seek revenge," Fasul snorted. "I was betrayed, and used as a pawn, yet I do not feel hatred to those that caused my injury. I am filled with longing to see my beloved Thisbe, and the child that she has reared for years without me. I have no time for revenge."

Again the doctor looked at Fasul as they walked. His face showed a mixture of disbelief and sadness.

"We have not spoken yet, on the true cause of your incarceration here. I believe now would be as good a time as any. I will say this first; your wife and child are coming to visit you in a day's time. News of your awakening has reached them, and they departed their home at the first opportunity."

The information pleased Fasul, even as he began to feel worried over the doctor's grim look. He had not considered the option that there might have been something actually wrong with him. The blow he received in the Ashion when it malfunctioned was what he perceived as being the reason for his extended slumber. What other reason could there be?

"Do you know how the Ashion functions?" the doctor asked.

"A host enters the shell, and awaits for the piercing light from the interior. A connection between the machine and the mind of the one inside is made. From there, anything that those outside of the Ashion ask, will be answered by the host's own memories."

"That is a simple explanation." The doctor nodded. "There is far more to the operation than that, but it isn't important right now. Allow me to explain just what happened on the day when you entered the Ashion.

"The sabotage done by the separatists was complicated, and highly irregular. Had they wished, they could have simply rerouted several routine security checks and implanted their falsified memory clips from there. That would have triggered the video displays the moment the Ashion was activated, and would have saved me the trouble of having to studiously observe you for the last several years. However, they didn't do that, instead, they placed time-delayed activations for their memory clips, so that when a host entered, and the scouring began, they would be played at that point. The important distinction between those two options is that the latter puts the host inside the Ashion in great peril. The images are run through the host, synching with his memory and picked up and displayed through the scouring process.

"In effect, those images become a part of your own memories. What that means is, right now, inside your episodic memory, there are thousands and thousands of memories dealing with the D'orl virus, and the pain that it created. When it was first learned of what transpired inside, I was amazed that you were still alive. The force of having those images forced into your mind, and then displayed for all those to see, it would be enough to send anyone into a nervous breakdown."

Fasul found that he was struggling to swallow. His mouth had gone dry, and it seemed as if he might become sick.

"Iâ€¦I was struck by something when I was inside. I fell unconscious shortly after the Ashion began to malfunction. I don't remember anything after that," Fasul admitted.

"Humph, that likely saved your life then," the doctor remarked shortly. "Still, the fact that those images found their way into the Palinthium chamber is enough of an indication that they did synch with your mind, regardless of whether you were conscious or not. So

they are definitely somewhere in there."

The doctor lightly tapped Fasul's head as he spoke.

"The security precautions we took concerning you should be easier to understand then, right?" he asked, "We didn't have much of a choice you see; while it was entirely possible you might never wake up from your coma-induced state, there was also an equal chance that you would return to the world of the living and try to relive some of the unending pain in your mind by killing everything in your path."

"I'm no monster," Fasul whispered. "I would never do such a thing."

"Perhaps, but we did not have any guarantees to work with. I specialize in cognitive science, Fasul, and I have observed for a long time, as I mentioned before. If, and when you fall victim to these dormant memories, no matter how gentle you may believe yourself to be, something may happen. 'From thought, action is born'."

Fasul chose silence. He denied the doctor's words even as he accepted them in his heart, and felt the pain that bloomed because of it. He was no monster, that was true; but for how long?

"Here," the doctor announced, and Fasul found himself standing in front of a door.

"You wanted to clean yourself didn't you?" the doctor asked when he saw Fasul's questioning look. "Go in, I'll escort you back to your room once you're finished."

Even as he tells me that I am not a prisoner, he treats me like one.

The room was immaculate; the walls were of a pristine whiteness that cast out a reflection of Fasul as he walked by. He stopped and gazed at himself, realizing that though it felt as if he had just seen himself in the mirror at his home the other day; it had in fact been years. His skin had become pale, the equivalent of the dress-piece he was wearing. His eyes seemed darker than before, as if there was a shadow cast over them. His once proud muscular frame had become soft, like he had lived a life of inactivity. Gazing at the individual differences closely, Fasul finally pulled himself away, and gazed at his body. He looked old, as if he had gained two hundred years of age overnight.

Thisbe shall not recognize me, and my child will recoil.

It was then that Fasul began to feel the twinges of anger. He hated the Majal that had caused everything to happen. He hated Geul for his trickery and deceit. He hated Enorym for not doing something to help him in the Palinthum. He hated the doctor that had constrained his movements like he was a criminal. He hated Thisbe for not being there to tell him that all was still well. He hated his child for the confusion that he imagined in it's eyes when it would see him for the first time. He hated the universe for giving him such a cursed life. He despised the God that would give grief to His creations, with no signs of relief.

Lashing out, Fasul struck the elderly stranger staring back at him.

He was weak, and the display of violence did nothing but hurt his hand. The reflection still mirrored his grief; it had not gone away. Disgruntled, Fasul pulled away and staggered towards the bathing area. The basin was empty of water, but the stall with a mounted faucet dripped water, and he came to stand underneath it. He could not see any controls to operate it, but the moment the thought crossed his mind, scalding hot water poured out and struck him. He did not recoil; instead he relished the pain.

_Let this water wash away my spirit, for I know now that I still walk amongst the living. I no longer wish to stay within this world, there is nothing tying my soul here anymore. Should you find me Death, I shall welcome you with open arms. _

Anguish flowed from his unseeing eyes, the tears mixed with the tepid water as they fell against the broken body. The dress-piece clung against his skin tightly, yet Fasul made no move to remove it. His was a mind far ravaged by this universe. The spirit of Majal and God was not infinite. Pain burns all, equally, and it breaks the strongest of souls. A creature of indeterminable strength, Fasul braved every pain the universe brought to bare against him, but faced with the ignorance and hatred of his entire race, he collapsed. What creature should be forced to carry the burden of being the catalyst for a war he did not start?

The Majal had moved on since that day in the Palinthium, but for Fasul it was only beginning.

The long hallway that led into Fasul's room and no other acted as a causeway through which the bowed Majal could here others coming. Footsteps, no matter how light, echoed soundly down the hallway and into his room. Thumping, swishing, swaying, the noise served as a constant reminder of his condition. Those steps were meant only for him, as they never receded until the creator of those noises arrived within his room. Each step drove the blade deeper into his heart; the reason he was in that room, the reason that so many came to see him, it was always there. He was determined to be a dormant criminal. One that had not acted violently, but there was little uncertainty on that matter. His undoing at the hands of the separatist's act of sabotage would claim his mind. He would cease being Fasul, and in his place would stand a maddened creature, overcome with memories of death and sadness, none of which he had ever witnessed with his own eyes.

And so, a day after he had spoken with the doctor, and fallen into depression within the cleansing area, Fasul found himself lamenting the single footsteps echoing within his room.

Cruel world! You have seen fit to take from me my family, my life, and even my own mind! Yet now I lay here upon this bed of thorns, wishing that I could have but a moment of silence whilst I prepare myself for my death, and you deny me that right! Spoiler of life, shall you deny my every wish? Or will you twist them into terrible things like you did with my dear child, Absolon? Find another soul to torture, for I have no desire to bare the sins of all my people.

Louder and louder the steps became, until it sounded as if Fasul's heart was thudding within his mind. The beat of drums to signal the oncoming army, hell bent on conquering everything that lay before them. How he wished it would go away! Would the universe not be pleased until he had succumbed to the madness dwelling within the darkest recesses of his mind? Then at this moment he would gladly give them the pleasure, if only it would end the incessant thumping that grew louder with every step. The reaper of souls was coming for him; only a demon of the next life could have such heavy steps.

At the moment when it seemed that if the steps grew any louder he might combust, they stopped. Fasul knew what this meant; his visitor had arrived. Fasul knew then that it was Enorym, though he knew this without having to look up and see whom it was.

"I apologize for not being here yesterday," Enorym said, by way of a greeting.

"I hold no expectations of you," Fasul shot back, deadpanned.

"Is that so?" Enorym asked, stepping into the room and approaching Fasul's bedside. An uncomfortable pause grew, as Fasul began to feel more and more annoyed with Enorym's presence.

"I presume you came here for a reason?" Fasul finally asked. Enorym smiled and nodded in reply. "Then tell me what that reason is and leave me be. The doctors here tell me that I am a danger to everyone but myself."

"I would like to speak to you, Fasul, but not here. Will you walk with me?"

Fasul considered what Enorym asked. Granted he had no desire to stay within this room any longer, but he also had no desire to hear any more of what Enorym might tell him. News of the politics involved with the Majal concerned him not in the least any longer. He wished to wash his hands of those affairs.

In the end his desire to move about and feel that he was still in control of his body overcame his other concerns. He followed Enorym away from his room and down the isolated hallway, no words passing between the two. An unending series of passageways passed by as they walked. Enorym seemed to know the facility well, as he moved with assurance even while Fasul kept up, curiosity nagging at his mind as to where their destination lay. The hallways were as empty as the last time Fasul navigated through them, and he wondered briefly whether the medical facility employed actual Majal, instead of machines.

It would turn out there was an actual staff of Majal working. Fasul and Enorym stopped above a second-level balcony that overlooked a patient observatory station. Doctors and other medical personnel studiously observed the monitors displaying vital information for every patient. The area was expansive, and Fasul stared in admiration. The ceiling was shaped into an arch, and instead of the drab grey it was a heavy industrial glass that permitted one to look out at the great expanse of space. The image was captivating, especially for Fasul, who had not found the time to explore the universe like much of his colleagues had in their younger days.

"Thisbe is going to arrive in a short while," Enorym said casually, his eyes affixed upwards and away from Fasul, "I wanted to make sure I was able to speak with you before she arrived."

Fasul was barely listening to Enorym. The combination of the scenery, and the mention of Thisbe, had sent his mind down a different track. Enorym noticed this.

"I would ask that you at least give me your attention for a moment. Though you may think I have come with no intention, my words carry weight."

Fasul's eyes closed, and his head lowered as he turned his attention to Enorym.

"Speak if you must."

The tone of Fasul's voice struck a chord with Enorym, and he steeled himself for what he was about to say.

"Your spirit, and your attitude tell me enough; you know of the illness you are now confronted with."

"It is no illness," Fasul retorted angrily, "It is a curse, a burden that is placed on my undeserving shoulders, by a people who I have come to loath."

"The Majal have wronged you then, is that it?" Enorym asked.

"Do not pretend to be a fool, Enorym," Fasul warned, "You were in the Palinthum when I entered the Ashion, unaware of what awaited me. I was nothing more than a pawn used to further the cause of the separatists. Geul betrayed the cause of the loyalists, even while they allowed my painful past to be used to further their own goals. Each side saw in me a tool to advance their cause, and did not hesitate to use me. Are you here to tell me that I have come to the wrong conclusion?"

"At that time, both sides of the debate looked upon you with greed filled eyes, I do not discount that," Enorym said. "My question now is whether or not you believe yourself to be attributed any blame for what happened."

"Blame? Am I supposed to feel guilty because I sought to share my pain with our people? Is it my fault that I stepped within the Ashion, not aware that potential death awaited me? Was I to know and understand that the words of peace that existed amongst the Majal could be so easily cast aside to simply further ones goals? Hypocrisy consumes the Majal as they are, and I only wish I could have seen it sooner, so that I might have avoided becoming a catalyst to such a pointless debate. Where does my blame lay then, Fasul?"

Enorym studied Fasul's animated features, and noted his face fell into a look of pained sadness.

"You speak with self-righteousness now, Fasul. I cannot help but remember a time when your speech was filled with kindness, and intelligence."

"The pain of being betrayed by ones people will do that," Fasul remarked darkly.

"Were you forced to make your account before the Palintheum that morning?" Enorym asked suddenly, viciously. His soft tone disappeared and now replaced with a hardened edge. He continued without waiting for Fasul's answer.

"Geul asked that you make your statement within the Ashion, and you made no objection. For days you had to ponder the reason why he would ask you to do such a task, and still your answer was the same. Why did you step into the Ashion on your own volition? What did you think you would contribute to the unending debate between both sides?"

"I thought that they intended to have me repeat my experiences with D'orl virus, and the loss of Absolon," Fasul answered, somewhat cowed by Enorym's questioning.

"Your tale of loss, while tragic, is no different than the thousands of other Majal that experienced the sting of loss associated with the D'orl. What made you think that you were any different from them?"

"Despite my loss, I did not seek out so easy an answer as to turn to the Flood genetics. I stayed with the teachings of our ancestors," Fasul replied, attempting to put more weight behind his words.

"So it was your morals that you thought were enough to impact those inside the Palintheum? The same individuals who had debated for years on the subject of the Flood genetic code, they were supposed to be moved by your tale of woe?"

Fasul's features twisted into a scowl as he prepared to rebuke Enorym for his callousness, but Enorym silenced him with a raised hand.

"Absolon's death was a tragedy, I do not wish to argue that fact. What I wish to understand is why you stepped into the Ashion that day. What did you hope to do?"

"I have told you why I agreed to Geul's proposition," Fasul said evenly.

"Do not be a fool!" Enorym shouted angrily. "You spoke to me of naivety once. Lying to yourself will not change what truly occurred. You are intelligent, and aware of the culture to which you belong, you would not step so foolishly into the Ashion believing that your memories could sway an entire society. What was it then, that drove you to do it? What propelled your body into that machine?"

Fasul's face had gone pale, and his body began to tremble. Enorym was raising memories he had wished to bury forever into his mind. He was stepping into the main floor of the Palintheum, staring out at the great expanse of Majal, all eyes settled upon him as he moved towards the Ashion. His trepidation as he crossed inside the Ashion, and the entrance closed behind him. Waiting and wondering what it would feel like, the fear over the drudging up of his memories of Absolon, and the panic before the sabotage even began to take place.

_What did I think as I found myself inside the domed seclusion of the

Ashion? What did I fear? I could not stand the thought of Absolon being displayed for all to see. I wasn't able to come to terms with reliving that experience again. I could not justify it! Oh what a damnable fool I am!_

Enorym looked on at Fasul in worry, as the elder Majal's face twisted into deep sorrow, and he nearly fainted. Fasul caught himself on the railing overlooking the lower floor, as Enorym rushed to his side.

"Are you all right my friend?" he asked worriedly. Fasul's breath was coming in short gasps, and his eyes were misty with burgeoning tears. He looked up at Enorym, and spoke what he knew in his heart.

"I wished to test my faith," he admitted. "I wanted to know just how deeply I believed in the cause I was fighting for."

A pained look crossed Fasul's face and he looked away.

"But I failed. I could not bare the thought of Absolon's death, and I wished to shut it away forever. I spurned his memory, and chose to make it my nightmare. At the moment when I stepped into the Ashion, my faith faltered, and the specter of Absolon's life and death overcame me. I could not justify my belief in our elders."

"Then if at the time of Absolon's life, had the procedure of inserting Flood genetics into a Majal was perfectedâ€|"

"I would have taken it!" Fasul exclaimed audibly, cutting Enorym off. "Even without any certainties to its effectiveness, I would not have hesitated even for a moment. I am a hypocrite, and a liar. I have lied to myself, to my kin, to Thisbe, and worst of all to Absolon himself. I could not admit it to myself at the time; I wished to believe in the one constant that still existed in my life. The words and laws our ancestors had created."

"Why?" Enorym asked simply, gently.

"Because it was all I had left. My dear Absolon was dead, Thisbe was a stranger to me, and my own people were attempting to change even the way we existed. I grasped onto that final hand, hoping it could me afloat. I convinced myself that the laws were unmovable, and any who went against them were fools.

"All I wished for was that all I held dear could remain the same. It was a childish wish, but I believed as hard as I could that it might come true. Instead everything has changed, and I have been left behind."

Enorym did not speak; he waited as Fasul struggled to come to terms with himself. The admission, and his revelation, they were not things one could so easily reveal and live with in a short time. Perhaps he waited a few minutes before speaking; perhaps it was several hours. It did not matter; he waited until Fasul was beginning to calm himself before he spoke again.

"Do not feel shame, my friend. Your wish was childish indeed, but there is not a creature within this universe that would not share that same wish should they find themselves in your situation. You erred when siding with the laws of the past, but I understand why you

did. There was a time when I despised my mate for her death. I felt she had abandoned me, and for many seasons I tried to never think of her. I was acting out of grief, much like you did when you chose your faith, over your love for Absolon."

Fasul seemed to understand the meaning in Enorym's words, and he took them to heart as he began to stabilize himself. Enorym, seeing the hint of understanding in his friend's eyes, stepped back and smiled. Fasul no longer appeared to be wavering on the edge. He was resolute in his frame, his mind, and his heart.

"I am happy for you Fasul, and I am glad that I have given you the hand that would pull you away from destruction," Enorym said. "But my intention for this day was two-fold. There is one last thing I must speak with you about before I allow you to await Thisbe and your child."

"I will listen for as long as you wish me to," Fasul said, as he offered a weak smile graciously. "I find myself once again in your debt, my friend. You have done me a great service."

"Modesty has its place, but I will not shy away from my task. I have come here with the intention of filling in the space in your memory; from the moment you entered the Ashion, to when you awoke just two days before. Much of what I will speak about, will cause you distress, but you must understand, and to do that, you will listen to all I have to say."

Fasul, who had begun to look relieved, reaffirmed his grim look and steeled himself.

"What amount of satisfaction you may take from it I do not know, but I will tell you that the act of sabotage on the Ashion was not a simple terrorist movement. As abhorrent as the deed was, it was not simply baseless extremism. Though I did not discover this for several days, on reflection I now see that there had been inordinate amounts of thought placed on that move.

"Behind the scenes of the separatist movement, work has consistently continued on the extraction of the Flood genetic code we desired to integrate within a Majal. For decades we met with continuous failure after continuous failure. Finally, three years before you stepped into the Ashion, seven accredited Majal biologists contacted the Elders that stood at the forefront of our faction. While the majority of the scientific community had decided to stay on the side of neutrality throughout the debate, the seven biologists were deeply interested in the Flood genetics. They sided with the separatists, while never actually believing in our cause. If your memory permits, you may recall the scientists that were originally tasked with categorizing and observing the select species on newly discovered planets."

"I remember, though their names escape me," Fasul said.

"They originally discovered the Flood in its doomed habitat, and since their initial discoveries involving the healing genome within the organisms, they had begun to yearn for another opportunity to study it. Keeping all moralistic musings aside, with the biologists at the helm work progressed exponentially and it soon became apparent that the day when the process of separating the Flood genetic code,

and inserting it within a Majal would actually come to fruition. As such, the political steps the separatists had planned were pushed aside for the time being, and steps were taken to ensure public support when it was announced that the procedure was completed.

"As you know well, when dealing with politics it is easy to lose sight of the cause for fighting at any level. With the many years of bickering back and forth, the separatists felt that the actual reason behind their rallying for a solution to the weakness that we possess had been forgotten. Or at the very least pushed to the backs of everyone's mind. Thus the idea of using the vast amounts of unreleased personal accounts of the D'orl virus in action was born. Because of the terrible way the Elders decided to resurge the D'orl virus, the operation was kept completely silent. I was blind to their true ambition, and much like yourself, I found myself being used as a pawn; instructed to retrieve the true reason behind your planned trip inside the Ashion.

"So, the moment came when I expected to be sitting before the memories you held, but instead, the Palinthium was filled with images of thousands of Majal, both sick and dying. Amidst the medley of chaos that erupted, the Elders amongst the separatists proclaimed that the debate was now pointless, as the procedure had been perfected. Any Majal that desired to be cured of any future concern in regards to their health, were given the opportunity to undergo the procedure, with nothing given in return. Certainly at first there was an incredible amount of scorn, and only the truly dedicated to the separatist's cause underwent the procedure. But as time went on, and no side effects arose, more and more Majal began flocking to the centers set up. The loyalists protested, and attempted to dissuade others from using the free procedure, but it was to no use. Time passed, and even the loyalists lost faith when they saw that the Flood genetic code really did work."

A twisted smile alighted Fasul's face.

"I do not blame them. In an age where the looming shadow of the Gray Seasons is still prevalent, it would be impossible to stare into the face of a cure and resist. The fear of an untimely death would frighten even the most avid advocate when they were away from the crowds amongst the Palinthium."

"I am pleased that you think so," Enorym said gently, "Because before Thisbe arrived with your beautiful daughter, I wanted you to know that when your child was but one year into her life, Thisbe took her to undergo the Procedure."

Something like a fifty-pound weight seemed to have crashed into Fasul's stomach, as his body was rocked with Enorym's words. His mind seemed torn in two; at once filled with joy at the news he had a daughter, and pain at the thought of Thisbe betraying him. He had come to terms with his falsely believing in the words of the ancestors, but in Thisbe's mind, she would have still believed him to be dead set on adhering to the laws.

"You spoke the words yourself, Fasul," Enorym said, seeing his distress, "You could not blame those who would be lured by the promise of a cure to any past and future strife."

"Yes—but," Fasul struggled to find the right words.

"You're struggling with this dilemma presented to you. Perhaps I have no words of comfort, but should I ever have been in your place right now, I would not feel betrayed. Instead I would be consumed with jealousy."

He paused when he saw Fasul's confused look, and then continued unabated.

"Thisbe chose to take your daughter, and allowed the Flood genetics to enter her child's body, not because she wished to defy your beliefs, but because she loved her child with all her heart. Thisbe did what you wished that you had been able to do for Absolon. She gave your daughter a life free of any unnecessary worry, and for that, I would feel envy."

Fasul's mind was still conflicted, though he could at the very least understand the underbelly of truth that Enorym spoke with.

"The times have changed, Fasul," Enorym began, "It has been a long time since there was a split amongst our people. There is no divide between those who have underwent the surgery involved with the procedure, and those who chose to remain a pure Majal. It is unfortunate that you have remained in stasis while the rest of our society has mended, and begun to move on since then. That is your lose, and I have come here today to hopefully lay the groundwork for the time when you may begin to heal in your own way.

"There isn't much else I can say to you Fasul, aside from this last advice. Since Absolon's death, you began to look for an outlet to vent your frustrations over the untimely death of your child. You found that outlet amongst the political stage involved with the Flood genetics. At first you did so because you found it abhorrent to the laws written by our ancestors, but you must remember that they were simple Majal like you or I. They were not wiser simply because of the time period they lived in. You realized that after a time, and at that time you began to despise those that touted the benefits of the Flood because you despised the idea that stopping the D'orl virus could be so easy. When Absolon died you were helpless, and now others were trying to say that a simple medical procedure could have wiped away all the pain you'd felt since that day.

"You are arrogant Fasul, when you believed that you knew best. Your adherence to the old laws was your way of looking down at the rest of us. Even those that shared your beliefs, they did not escape your personal form of scorn. For many years you stood atop the ledge overlooking out people, and you deemed yourself better than the rest of us. Whether that has begun to change now, it is irrelevant. I am pleading with you my friend; learn to forgive what has been done. Hatred for what happened in the past will only pull you away from the path to healing your wounds. It is fine to carry remorse for what you have lost, but hate and anger are emotions that cannot be held tightly to your chest for too long.

"All I can ask of you is that, when you look into the eyes of your daughter for the first time, do not allow yourself to see the reflection of those that nearly took your life. See the same daughter that Thisbe chose to save even as she knew she went against your own beliefs."

Enorym set one hand heavily on Fasul's shoulder, before delivering his final words.

"Long ago, you consoled me when I lost my mate to the same disease that took your son. You helped me work through the pain that I kept close to my chest, and ever since then I have sought to return that favor. I believe I have done so now. There is no debt owed on your part, we are finally even."

A hard look was all Enorym delivered after that, before turning away and disappearing down the corridor they had arrived through. Fasul stayed behind, his body weighed down by his thoughts.

Let go of my hateâ€|

It is something easier said than done. For a time I believed that I held no scorn in my heart, and as Enorym said, I considered myself above the petty spite that would consume other Majal. They were not as wise as me, I believed. Have I truly been so arrogant in the past? I can gain nothing from thinking in such foolish terms, but why is it that I have only begun to see that now? Did I need someone to point this out to me? If so, I am more indebted to Enorym than he may think.

Thisbe acted out of love. The instinctual love she felt for her daughter. The same love that drove her into seclusion after Absolon passed, and she was incapable of doing anything for him. I felt the same as her at the time, but why did I strive for a sense of order through the Palintheum, while she did not? Was it the child that grew within her? Did the knowledge that she would soon birth another child give her the resolution to hold to her feelings of love? I cast my own aside then, when I realized that my love for Absolon did nothing to stop him from passing.

Was it all nothing more than a game of chance? Had I seen the chance for redemption in my next child, would I have not strayed into a path of darkness? Can life truly be described with so simple a set of rules? What conclusion then, am I to draw? Did I throw away such a sizable portion of my life to arrogance? When will the answer come to me, or shall I have to find it with my own hands?

Pacing back and forth within his secluded medical room, Fasul idly wondered how long he had spent thinking over his conversation with Enorym.

The answer shall not come to me, until I look into Thisbe's eyes, and my daughter's. That is where I will find my answer.

A sharp intake of breath caught his attention and Fasul turned his head quickly. There at the doorway to his room stood his mate, Thisbe. Her hand was interlaced with another, and slowly Fasul found himself gazing upon the sight of a beautiful young Majal. He knew then that it was his daughter, and at once he found tears in his eyes. The sound of a suppressed sob drew his attention back to Thisbe, who had her covered her mouth with her hand as tears slipped freely down her face.

At the moment of truth, there was no question that needed answering in his heart. Fasul's arms outstretched, beckoning Thisbe to him, and she rushed towards him, wrapping herself in his arms as she began sobbing. Fasul closed his eyes as he felt the wave of calm sweep over him. He was at peace then, for the first time since Absolon's death, he felt at peace. Opening his eyes, he found himself staring down at his daughter, who had followed her mother, but stopped several feet short. Their eyes met, and Fasul found himself faced with nothing more than the gentleness he had last felt when he had stared down into the eyes of Absolon. There was no hate or scorn towards Thisbe for her decision.

Looking into the eyes of his child, Fasul realized that he carried no hate any longer. There was remorse for the time he lost, but that was the limit of his regret. As Thisbe's arms encircled him, her sobs muffled by the cloth on his chest, Fasul smiled. His daughter slowly smiled back, and he knew that he was ready to start the healing process. Faced with his mate and his daughter, Fasul realized that he wished to become someone they could depend on, and though it may take time he was willing to work for as long as possible. Thisbe would become his support for now, and he knew that she would welcome his weight.

There had come no sound as Thisbe and his daughter approached his room, and that reassured him most of all that everything would be all right from now on.

Author's Notes: Urrrrgh, this chapter just did not want to get written. No real explanation, though a serious setback in my internet access being forcibly removed by an unknown source for most of the week certainly attributed to that.

**Only one more chapter left in the Forerunner Chronicles!
WOW!**

28. The Forerunner Chronicles Part Three

The End of a War

Forerunner Chronicles Part Three

A Final Gasp Before the End

An endless universe, expansive and void of light, lay host to the unending flight of a species that no longer gave thought to the meaning of home. Vagabonds and wanderers, this species existed for the sole intent of flight. They fled, from a life that pursued them and wished to do away with them. After so long, the species began to forget their lives from the past. Flight became normalcy; dormancy meant fear. A habitat of metal and space was their home now. Without the lush green lands that they once inhabited the species forgot many things, the smell of air that had not been recycled, the feel of a planet beneath their feet, the dusting of rain as the weather changed, the chill of a morning frost, the exaltation that filled them as the wind whipped through their fields.

Without a natural home, the species had no sense of belonging, and for this species in particular such a feeling was devastating. By losing what they once treasured, the species was forced to adapt and change the way they lived. Many struggled to change, and some latched onto the comforting words that those in positions of authority would pass down to them. Like an animal that tears morsels of flesh from a rotting corpse, they would take these words and devote themselves to the relief and satisfaction that could be garnered. For most there could be no acceptance of this change. They had done nothing wrong, yet they found themselves punished; for merely existing. Many grew angry, at their enemies, at their friends, at themselves. Anger could not last forever though, and for those that could not hold onto that feeling, they became bitter and reproachful of everything. Hatred for their lives, and those around them smoldered within, but it was not hate. Still there were those that could find no solace in anger or acceptance, and they devoted their time to thinking and pondering, wondering how their fate could have become what it now was. With no answers coming to them no matter how hard they pondered, these creatures settled into an existence no different than death. They slept, ate, and drank, but they did not live. Death was what had taken them, yet their bodies remained. A contradiction of existence.

What gave life purpose? This question these creatures did pose to themselves as they continued their endless flight. Thoughts of love, of duty, and of honour filled them. It was then that they did come to understand, that they possessed none of those attributes anymore.

In their sadness and their rage, they wondered how long ago it was that they were cast out from their world. How many years had passed since that night when their existence changed? Why did the memory of that night feel so vague?

They could find no answers, for no one wished to remember what had driven them from their homes. The night when the screams signalled the harbinger of the universe's death. When friend became enemy, and love became hunger and rage.

Who was to blame?

They asked themselves this, they asked but they could give no answer. The truth would destroy them.

For it was they, that were to blame.

--

**Tch'enkyu (World of Mourning)**

**Inotu K'syk (Thirtieth year of the Lost History)**

**32:45 (Time adjusted for planetary path through solar system)**

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The orbital transport rumbled audibly as it touched down onto the planet's surface, the signal for the passengers that it was safe to stand. The Majal aboard quickly removed the harnesses in place and headed aft for the exit, buzzing with a life that hadn't been seen

amongst their people in some time. An oddity it may have seemed, that the arrival upon a planet whose sole purpose was to allow the Majal a time to show their grief, now became a symbol of hope. The ancient monuments, the prayer offerings, and other staples of the planet's long history would now be something that they could latch onto, and observe as a testament to the perseverance of their old way of life.

Fasul was the last Majal to exit the orbital craft, his movements far less hurried than the others. His gaze canvased the surroundings, noting the longstanding temple doors as if reassuring himself that the world was indeed the one he had visited before.

He fell into step behind a family of Majal, who were busy speaking amongst themselves, eager to offer prayers for their loved ones that had passed on. Thousands of Majal were descending on the planet now, eager to revisit a part of their old lives.

For Fasul, there was little emotional attachment given to the planet and the deep societal ties it presented. Sadness and grief were not emotions one could pull up upon a moments notice, and keep hidden away at any time; such a convenient thing did not exist. He had grieved for the better part of three decades, mourning the loss of his mate, his kin, and all who he once called friends. Time could not bridge the chasm within his soul however, and the wounds inflicted upon him stayed open, festering within him as each day passed. There was no grief remaining within him, he was an empty body, a ghost of living flesh that had yet to pass on to the other side.

Tch'enkyu was a planet of lush order. Heavy foliage decorated its many sites, and the facilities built by the Majal ancestors were as wondrous today as they were millennia ago. Comprised of mostly land, the planet was devoid of any wildlife, a byproduct of the minuscule percentage of fresh water deposits. This was inconsequential to the Majal, as they had chosen to ignore the vast majority of the planet, and built their constructs near the northern hemisphere. The development site correlated with the lone source of water that supplied the many canals and waterworks that bled life into the flora of the planet. The weather was incremental, as before the Majal had arrived, the patterns of rain had flooded and destroyed much of the land. Using technology, they assisted the planet in creating an isopiestic system of natural weather. Over several centuries, the planet became stable, and inhabitable enough so that the Majal chose to make the world a stable pillar in their civilization.

Grief, mourning, sadness, regret. They were emotions that the Majal chose to ignore, believing that the only path to proliferation could come through shaking free of the susceptible feelings that lower species could be consumed by. This belief, though deep-rooted within Majal culture, could not be strictly adhered to as pain and suffering could never be avoided. Tragedies occurred, and the need for harmed individuals to vent their pain was prevalent. The Majal were no exception. Thus, Tch'enkyu was born, along with the once a year (going by the typical yearly calendar for the Majal, one year would encompass thirty-seven months) visit to the planet. It became a tradition, over time becoming one of the staples of Majal culture. Millions would traverse to the planet, and for one day they would give in to their emotions.

For all of his adherence to the Majal culture, and the principles set

by his ancestors, Fasul felt the need to hide their emotions to be foolish. Though, that way of life was over now. Why should one dwell on the past?

Why dwell on the past?

Monotonous, mechanical, and measured steps carried him through the overarching doorway that signalled as the entrance to the proving grounds. Inside, the inner gardens would lay awaiting, immeasurably beautiful works of nature that decorated the path leading toward the temple residing in the centre.

The mass of Majal moved forward as one entity, each person's goal the same as the next. Though some were enthused, while others were solemn, and others still outspoken yet nervous, they did not yield all the same. Trapped towards the end of this massive swarm of creatures, was Fasul, his head not hung low like some, nor held high like the others. He was staring straight forward, but not determined; he'd seen this planet before, and he knew the pain that it held.

Long ago, in what felt like another lifetime, he had come with Thisbe, his mate, and grieved for his dearly departed son. The superfluous intent of their visit did not grant either grieving Majal respite from their pain, it had merely deepened that grief. To so hotly expose one's emotions, and then gather them up within their chest; it was an exercise in futility. Grieving for too long could be damaging to any creature, but to grieve for so short a time, it would destroy even the strongest of any species. Unfortunately, finding that spot in between could prove to be quite difficult for many, and as Fasul shut out the surrounding world, he could not claim to have ever released his grief.

Floundering for years, season upon season passing by unnoticed, he willingly wasted away his spared life. Blaming those that were no longer among the living for his pain, he left reason behind. The ghosts of his past followed him with every step, clinging to him and pulling his body to the ground, refusing to allow him to move on.

The inner gardens passed, their beauty lingering behind the Majal as they moved, their presence not determining when the flora would expose themselves to the world. For those unfamiliar with the planet, the sudden shift from natural beauty to artificial architecture could be alarming. Sturdy, imposing walls surrounded the centre of the proving grounds, a large gate providing the only entrance to the inner sanctum. As they neared, the mass of Majal found themselves squeezed into a funnel, as the people attempted to enter through the gates.

From his position near the end of the mass entity, Fasul regarded the gates with a sense of hostility. For the Majal, this ancient building was the last refuge of hope. A people that have been cast into the endless space of the universe, forced into a permanent nomadic state, and living with the continuous fear of being endlessly hunted by a species they could not fight, and could barely contain. That this building could still stand, when every other creation of their people had been destroyed, it was enough.

Such optimism served only to anger Fasul, whose understanding of the

Majal's state in the universe was far from idealistic. What good could hope do for a doomed people? It would only make the end come that much harder for all.

His reservations aside, Fasul stepped through the gateway nonetheless and found himself before the temple. It was deceiving, its architecture that is, as despite being a temple there was no roof. An open air mausoleum, which seemed a contradiction of sorts. The interior of the temple was constructed with alarming simplicity. Stone walkways were littered about the grassy floor, all leading towards the lone structure inside the temple; which Fasul saw as he entered, was also where all the other Majal were now surrounding. Measuring nearly identical to the Palinthum, the temple (which had never received a name in thousands of years of existence) could house hundreds of thousands of Majal. As it was, the mass that Fasul had been sequestered with were stuck just outside the doors of the temple. The original constructors of the temple may have anticipated such a moment, as the temple was built with alternate exits, located on the east and west sides of the inner temple. After a few minutes, the Majal that surrounded the marker near the far end of the temple, would break off and head for the exits. Even from such a distance, Fasul could hear many in the throes of emotion. Some wept, while others laughed, and still more became enraged, speaking angrily about the state of affairs that brought about this day.

Hours passed, and soon Fasul found himself in front of the structure standing a few feet away from it, much in the same manner as he once had, many years ago. He did not feel grief however, instead he was unmoved. The structure was merely a slab of metal, or perhaps a type of stone, cut into the shape of a symbol, one he did not recognize from any of the writing's that littered the Majal past. The surface was smoothed, and cast reflections back at all those that gazed upon it. In the waning light, Fasul could still make out the words that were etched into it's surface. Words carved by their ancestors, eons ago, when the Majal had little worries. Many called the structure a poem to those that had passed on, while others felt it to be the consoling words meant for those that still lived. There had never been a clear answer, as people would see what they wished to see.

As his eyes roamed over the words, Fasul saw the reflection of himself, and attempted to recall what it had been like when he first read the words:

**Ying'kh Ilsun Pakinh (Life is not eternal)**

**Bak Sunc Mi Ilsun DÂ'meon (Those born are not promised)**

**Kiln Suo Magin G'in 'Ben (A life that will be long)**

**Lom Bi Fedm's Mo'chi (Nor an existence)**

**Kahn Rin Med (Filled with laughter)**

**Poshi Ilsun Pakinh (Pain is not eternal)**

**Fet'sun Gol'din Mahgeo Poshi (To give in to pain)**

**Pak'gin Suhl Bu'o Nehi Goh (Is to give in to fear)**

**Nehl Endo Link Lo Bei (Let strength guide you)**
**Maib Suge Vendi Mennai (When our hands cannot)**
**Cahri Bei Luo Gen'fen (Carry you any further)**
**Ying'kh Ilsun Pakinh (Life is not eternal)**
**Poshi Ilsun Pakinh (Pain is not eternal)**
**Me'lo Sen Gaml De Soh (May your tears fall here)**
**Bie Mabi Funi Cahri Foh (So they may carry on)**
**Yon Vo Kahrim Ying'kh (To the next life)**

Many who read these words, were reduced to tears, as if they held the power to remove all the grief from a creature in an instant. There were those who read them and found happiness, believing their grief to be nothing more than an illusion; that had now been lifted from their shoulders.

To Fasul, they were words, and nothing more. He read them and felt nothing more than he would have felt reading a warning label near a dangerous section of the ship that was now his home.

It had been a waste of time to come, an inconvenience and nothing more. The desire to return to the city filled him, and Fasul turned to leave, but found his way blocked by the family he had been trailing behind for much of the journey to the temple. It still pained him to see a family, whole and together, somehow surviving through all of the terror. Two mates, a child, and an elder, all together. Fasul waited impatiently for the family to finish their gawking so that they might move and allow him passage.

As if the universe was mocking him, the elder Majal suddenly began to weep, breaking down as if he was constructed of paper. The elder caught himself upon the ground, kneeling before the structure whilst still staring at the requiem for the dead. His family knelt down to aid him, the child asking what had caused him to give out such an emotional outburst. A few concerned moments passed before the elder stood once more, smiling as if embarrassed but not shamed by his tears. He turned and smiled at Fasul apologetically, before patting the small child upon the head.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," the elder spoke, his voice much stronger than his frail form seemed to suggest, "But I was moved by this monument."

_Another one, _Fasul thought bitterly. _ Another fool buying into such empty promises. 'Pain is not eternal'? Pain ends when life ends, to move on from pain is to die. Only our ancestors could be so cold as to think such words might soothe a creature's soul._

"Its a nice poem," the older Majal said, the child's father most likely.

"Not the words you can see," the elder said, shaking his head and smiling before turning back to the monument, "I speak of what you cannot see."

"What do you mean?" the child asked, confused.

"Come closer, I shall whisper it into your ear," the elder said, lowering his head and speaking into the child's ear. The two mates looked at one another in confusion, before the elder pulled back and the child made an exclamation of surprise.

"I didn't see that written! Where is it? I can't see it!" the child shouted excitedly, gazing up at the words he could barely make out.

"A long time ago, when the sole Majal was charged with etching into this stone a discourse that every Majal from then until the end of our people would read and seek comfort from, he inserted his own words, but he did so in a way that only those who looked for them could find them. Words that truly do give joy to those that find them."

"How do you know about it?" the child asked.

"When you are my age, dear child, you will know that there are many things you'll have heard rumoured or whispered throughout your life, and at one moment you may be given the opportunity to discern whether those words were lies or not. Today we have both learnt that some truths still exist."

The elder straightened up, looking away from the monument and then seemingly locking eyes with Fasul.

"There is truth at the beginning, but only if you look for it," the wizened Majal smiled, "I may be old, but my eyes still work, and so shall yours. Look closely."

He then turned away, and stepped off towards the exit, his family in tow, the two mates apologizing quickly to Fasul for their family's rudeness and then leaving. Fasul felt the desire to follow them, but...

The monument was before him again, his body silent and his eyes searching, roaming over the words again and again. What secret lay within them? What possible message could be conveyed that would touch the heart of an elder so quickly?

Only a fool would follow the words of a senile creature, Fasul admonished himself. _There could be no words that might give anyone happiness._

Still, his feet remained unmoving, and his eyes continued roving.

A fool, I am.

Thousands flowed by, staring at the monument, taking away what satisfaction they could gleam from the cold, unmoving stone slab. Fasul stood rooted to the spot, hours passing, as light began to leave the temple, and the number of Majal still passing through began to lessen. Many began to observe Fasul with the same looks that they gave the stone slab.

His stoic and silent appearance belayed the hurried pace within his

mind as he stirred over the requiem, over and over again. He was intelligent, but with nothing but the mumbled words from the elder, he had no real starting point. Frustration grew within him, and doubt formed as to whether the elder Majal had truly been speaking the truth, and was not simply playing a trick. As he continued his fruitless search, another Majal drew closer to him, far closer than most of the other visitors had dared. Fasul turned to his head in annoyance, and found Gan Ful next to him.

"I thought I had seen you before," the younger Majal spoke with a smile, "I'm pleased to see you took the opportunity to leave the city. Its good to breathe air that is pure, and to feel the natural heat of the universe once again. I'd forgotten what it felt like."

Gan Ful turned to the stone slab and laughed while clapping a hand on Fasul's shoulder.

"Every time I have seen this thing I wonder what was going through the mind of the one who etched those words into the stone. Could they have known that millions would see them, and attempt to draw support from them? Bah, of course the answer is no. Would one be so daring as to insert such an amusing game into the words, were it to become so important?" Gan Ful mused happily to himself.

"Game?" Fasul asked, his jaw tightening.

"The 'Engraver's Secret' is what most of the older generation referred to it. A simple word game, an anagram and nothing more, but it is unknown to many," Gan Ful laughed, "Of course, who would think to look within the words that guide an entire civilization?"

A starting point was suddenly supplied to him, and Fasul was immediately thankful for the first time that Gan Ful had decided to annoy him. The elder had said that the beginning was key, and the hidden phrase was built from the letters of certain words according to Gan Ful. A simple enough deduction was to conclude that the words from the start of each stanza would be the ones that built the new phrase.

A difficult deduction then, to rearrange the letters of all sixteen words into something coherent, with nothing but his mind to work with. Fasul was clever though, and anagrammatic phrases had been a game he'd often play with his children, a way of amusing himself.

Slowly, the phrase was built:

_**Bikh Yulfm Nest'e Kaib Koln Sohn Hag Kinb Pal Poshin Gin Iloh
Ma'kh Gach Riyk Pemi**_

Once organized into the same format as the rest of the requiem, and connected with the final section, it concluded the work:

**Me'lo Sen Gaml De Soh (May your tears fall here)**

**Bie Mabi Funi Cahri Foh (So they may carry on)**

**Yon Vo Kahrim Ying'kh (To the next life)**

**Bikh Yulfm Nest'e Kaib (And reach those who)**

**Koln Sohn Hag Kinb Pal (Are no longer with us)**

**Poshin Gin Iloh Ma'kh (Pain is not forever)**

**Gach Riyk Pemi (But hope is)**

"Can hope last forever?" Fasul spoke aloud, to himself.

"What's that?" Gan Ful asked, surprised to hear Fasul speak after such a long silence.

"This is no requiem for the dead," Fasul said painfully, "It is a soliloquy about the living."

Fasul's sudden understanding was muffled, as a heavy, blaring alarm echoed throughout the temple, and across the entire planet of Tch'enkyu. The lingering Majal released a series of surprised shouts, and worried screams.

"Damn!" Gan Ful cursed angrily, "Those blood-thirsty bastards managed to track us!"

"Even here..." Fasul trailed off mournfully, staring at the reddening sky, "They would even desecrate our symbol of peace?"

"Come Fasul! To the transport carriers, we'll get off this planet and allow our warriors to deal with these locusts!" Gan Ful urged, extending his arm to Fasul. Fasul ignored him and instead kept his gaze at the world above the temple. Already one could see the hundreds of ships in the distance, floating thousands of miles away from the planet. How many of their former brothers were aboard those ships?

"We don't have time for this!" Gan Ful shouted angrily. He was frightened, Fasul could tell. For all of his earlier bravado, the thought of facing the Flood, and the Half-Breeds were enough to chill even Gan Ful's delusional mindset.

"We have time for nothing but death," Fasul smiled, calmly, "Our time is up. We've been forgotten in this universe, and now we shall await death. I shall choose how I pass, and I believe that giving my life for this planet...this temple...this monument...this hope, is how I will give up my life."

"Then nothing but a horrific death awaits you."

"So be it," Fasul spoke, "You may leave now Gan Ful. I will not think less of you because of it; in fact I am indebted to you. Without your urgings, I would have never come to this planet."

"Do not place your death on my shoulders," Gan Ful said angrily. His head twisted to the sky, as if checking to see whether the ships dotting the waning light had come any closer.

"If sanity should return, I will delay the transport for as long as I can."

His final comment uttered, Gan Ful turned to flee, exiting the temple

along with the last few remaining Majal. The others paid no mind to Fasul as they left. In but a few moments, he was alone within the temple, and after several minutes, he was alone on the planet.

_They will likely send in the Flood first, as it has been almost a year since we last met the Half-Breeds, and they will be hungry for the taste of Majal flesh. How long will I be able to hold out? Until nightfall? I would quite dearly wish to see what this world looks like when enclosed in darkness. _

The ships in the sky were closer now.

Stepping softly, Fasul wondered briefly whether he would be possessed by the Flood. He'd heard tales whispered throughout the floating city, about the Half-Breeds devouring Majal whilst they still lived, using the Flood to incapacitate them.

Endless echoes accompanied him as he traced a random pattern around the temple floor. He was calm; a fact that seemed absurd. Death awaited him, there could be no uncertainty. The Majal would not send a rescue team, they would not know of his disappearance, no matter how hard Gan Ful may scream it. The Majal would not care, for they knew what Fasul now knew. They were already dead; they existed on borrowed time, trading the lives of countless civilizations, and species on many of the planets within the universe, allowing them to be invaded by the Half-Breeds, in order to buy the Majal time.

What a difference time can make! I once stood in this temple and did not shed a tear over my child, questioning the rhetoric behind my visit. Now I am prepared to give my life for it. An oddity, but perhaps fitting in the end.

A thunderous crash made the temple shudder noticeably.

That would be the Flood capsules. Thousands of infectious forms are spilling out as I walk, and they are all heading for this temple. How foolish of them, to waste such an effort on one individual. I'm flattered.

His body felt light, and his hands trembled slightly. Fear crept into his body, causing him to waver and cast a glance at the entrance to the temple. Searching perhaps, for something to save him. He shook himself free of those false hopes quickly, and turned to look at the monument, the engraved stone that seemed to glow red as the last remnants of light gave the sky a fiery appearance.

More crashes sounded off, this time nearer to the temple. The tremors caused Fasul to lose his footing. As he sat upon the hardened ground, he lost control of his willpower. How many Flood now walked upon the planet, intending to descend upon him? Would he see them coming? Which entrance would they use? Would the Half-Breed walk with them, knowing the planet to be devoid of weapons per their ancestors desire? If they did, would the Half-Breed be a Majal that Fasul once knew?

_Vile temptress! The desire to run fills me! But I cannot, what point would that serve? I would suffer an infidel's death! To be hunted down by the Flood, and consumed by the Half-Breed's, while I struggled like an animal fearing death. To give myself to death now, I will no longer be haunted by this universe. Eternal peace, after a

moment's agony._

The wind carried with it, the sound of screams. Fasul had heard them once before, during a night long ago. His breath hitched, and he felt ill, memories of Thisbe, and his beloved daughter came to him at once. Had it really been over thirty years since that night?

Suicide then? Is that what I am reduced to? My noble words of giving my life for this temple, they are but a ruse. A cover to conceal that which I know too well. I am tired of living. My life should have ended alongside what was left of my family, but instead, I lived, and for thirty years I have been tormented by my memories. Is this not what I have wished for?

A footstep, the sound was unmistakable. It came from behind Fasul, but trapped within his own fear he could not turn to face the terror that had entered the sacred temple. There was a pause, and more footsteps followed.

The afterlife may spurn me, but I cannot give my life up so quickly! I do not want death! Allow the heavens to laugh at me if they wish; though first send me aid! Anything! Anyone!

The sounds stopped, and an agonizing silence came, just as the light in the sky faded, and the temple was bathed in darkness.

"Well, I certainly didn't expect this."

"You'd think they might have mentioned someone decided to stick around."

"It's the way things always work for us, get sent into certain death, with as little info as possible along with the expectation of glorious success."

The voices did not sound like they belonged to the Half-Breed. Summoning his dwindling courage, Fasul turned his head, and was taken aback by what stood behind him. Seven creatures, covered in some form of armour. They wore helmets that covered their faces, but Fasul could see that they were looking at him.

"Why is he sitting down like that?" one of the armoured creatures asked, "Doesn't he know the Half-Breeds are seconds away from wiping this planet off the face of the universe?"

"Maybe he's injured? Everyone got out of here pretty fast when the alarms went off. I could see someone getting trampled during that chaos."

"What should we do? Those freaks decided to spare the planet a Flood infestation, but they sure as hell sent down a few of their fighters."

"It'll be another twenty minutes before the roaming city is able to jump out of here, we can't go back just because someone was left behind."

"You're so cold-hearted Alanna."

Their words...they spoke the language of the Majal. But they were not Majal.

"What are you?" Fasul asked, disrupting the creatures bantering.

"He can talk," one of the creatures commented, amusement tinting his voice.

"We aren't Half-Breeds, if that makes you feel any better," another spoke, this time with a feminine tone.

"Nor are we fools who stand around talking while our enemy nears our position," an unseen voice spoke, gruffly.

"Our dear leader finally decides to join us," the armoured creature nearest to the entrance spoke, turning and looking out into the darkness. A silhouette emerged, another armoured creature, though the one newly arrived carried with him a tool of some sorts. Fasul did not recognize it.

"Take the Crystal and square it away, we will need it as a backup in case the Half-Breed's do not fall for our bait," the one the others identified as their leader said, handing the tool to one of the other creatures. The leader turned then, and locked eyes with Fasul.

"Why are you here? The rest of your kind has fled, yet you remain?"

"What are you?" Fasul asked once more, "Why do you know of the Majal and the Half-Breed?"

A short bitter laugh emerged from the leader.

"We are your sacrificial lambs! Sent to the slaughter so that your people may survive a little while longer. We are called Reclaimers, and we are all that stands between your people, and the Half-Breed."

A scream erupted from nearby, blood-curdling in length.

"It would appear the time for talk is over," the leader spoke, "Alanna, you and Yuan head for the coordinates in the northern sector. Wander and Liliun, you'll hunker down near the ship in case the Half-Breed decide to try and strand us here. Gein, Usul, and Pendrick, I want you to send the Half-Breed's running toward Alanna and Yuan's positions so we can make sure they won't get off the planet in time. I'll plant the 'Cleanser' in this temple. Keep your eyes on the indicator, when I'm ready, you'll know."

The speech given, the seven others departed, moving at an incredible speed. In an instant Fasul was alone with the leader of the Reclaimers.

"You chose a lucky moment to stay behind," the leader remarked, stepping past Fasul and heading for the monument, "The Half-Breed are starved, and logic is fleeting when they are in this state. They'll give chase to us, but they won't use their ships to burn the planet. They want our flesh to be fresh, I'm sure it tastes much better that way."

"You intend to fight them?" Fasul asked, astonished that any creature could be so foolish.

"Don't be ridiculous!" the Reclaimer scoffed, "The Half-Breeds would tear us apart in moments. We have neither the strength nor the technology that would allow us to adequately fight the Half-Breed on even terms."

"Then you sent the others to their deaths knowingly?"

"We have no interest in fighting fair," the Reclaimer explained, "Idiotic notions of honour and sacrifice have no place within our strategy. Delaying the Half-Breed long enough so your people can retreat is our only goal here tonight. Your superiors have no desire to see us waste our lives. We are a cannon fodder that is best saved until the perfect moment."

"You speak of my people as if you know them well," Fasul pointed out.

"Indeed I do! I was only a child when I and many others like me were abducted. We were raised to be your warriors, and what you see is the result. I know you and your kind very well."

"I have not heard whisper of your existence in all my years," Fasul said. The Reclaimer laughed.

"How well would it sit with you, were you to discover that an inferior species was being cultivated in order to fight the enemy that pursues you through this universe? Desperate times call for unethical methods. Morals and conscience have no place within a war. The innocent have no need to know. That is why you haven't heard of us before."

Screams once again tore through the night, followed by muffled explosions. Fasul cast a weary glance into the darkness, while the Reclaimer clicked his tongue and pulled something free from his waist. It was a cylindrical device, which was then placed upon the base of the monument.

"It would appear the Half-Breed have found Gein and the others," the Reclaimer commented casually as he straightened, "Which means we won't be able to stay here much longer."

"What did you place upon that monument?" Fasul asked sharply.

"A Niobe."

"What is that?"

>"A device that will emit an electromagnetic pulse. Its range is large, and it will send the Half-Breed's fleet into disarray for several hours while we make our escape. It will also trap all that remain on this planet, so that when the other device is detonated, they'll be destroyed along with the planet."<p>

"I will not allow that!" Fasul shouted, "This planet cannot be destroyed!"

"Oh? Why is that?" the Reclaimer asked, turning to look at Fasul once more.

"This planet carries the hope of my people, and the memories of our ancestors. I would rather it fall into the hands of the Half-Breed than to see it destroyed recklessly like that."

"Hope? What possible hope could this planet hold for you?"

"I cannot explain it."

The Reclaimer regarded Fasul with a cool stare, before shrugging helplessly and moving towards the fallen Majal.

"Regardless of how you feel, this planet will be destroyed one way or another. Either the Half-Breed shall claim it, and ravage it with the Flood, or we shall destroy it and kill many of the insipid creatures. Did you think your sacrifice would change those facts?"

"I possess no illusions about the fate that awaited me, but knowing that my people have created warriors sufficient for fighting the Half-Breed, I cannot imagine that they would willingly destroy a planet that has meant so much to our people. To make a stand here, rather than continue our endless fleeing, it would at least grant us our right into the afterlife."

"How typical," the Reclaimer said angrily, "Your kind are all alike. So eager to throw away your lives for pitiful things like honour and glory, yet you recoil when the deed is ready to be done. Instead, other civilizations, entire planets with histories spanning millennia, are sacrificed in order for you to survive. Is hypocrisy a requirement when being birthed into your species?"

Fasul blustered, unable to form a retort, he settled for simply climbing to his feet. The Reclaimer watched him for a moment before returning to where he had placed the device earlier.

"Is this slab of metal and stone really worth your life?" the Reclaimer asked, indicating the inscribed message that had moved Fasul previously.

"It is."

Without prompting, the Reclaimer shook his head momentarily, before raising his armoured fist, and crashing it into the stone slab. Fasul was too shocked at the creature's actions to consider the strength that was needed to destroy the monument. Again, the Reclaimer's fist rose, and once more was driven into the only remaining hope the Majal possessed.

"Stop!" Fasul shouted, charging at the Reclaimer. As he neared the Reclaimer struck Fasul across the face with his arm, the blow coming far stronger than Fasul could have ever anticipated.

"Stay on the ground," the Reclaimer ordered, "One such as yourself that wishes for death, has no right to stand while we fight to preserve your life. Your monument is now destroyed, do you still wish for death?"

Fasul could barely hear the Reclaimer, as his ears were ringing audibly from the blow he'd received. His vision began to fade, the last lingering sight to register with him before he fell, would be

the monument, smashed upon the ground.

A short time later, Fasul returned to consciousness. He was no longer within the confines of the temple. Muffled voices surrounded him.

"Cyriacus, I had no idea you were so kind. Carrying that Majal all the way back to the ship."

"I would have left him to rot, he jeopardized our mission with his theatrics. Better to let him die than to bring back anything useless."

The staggering weight of his head confused Fasul, until he recalled the strike from the Reclaimer. With a groan he forced his eyes open. A silver bulkhead filled his blurred vision.

"Don't speak so harshly," a nearby voice spoke, "That Majal possessed the courage to fight the Half-Breed by himself. Suicidal though he may be, such strength should not be wasted."

"Always with the dramatics, dear leader," another voice scoffed.

"Our mission was accomplished, and we survived, everything else is inconsequential. I saved this creatures life on my own volition, there is no need for debate. We will link up with the fleeing city in a short while. Relax while you can, the effects of the battle will be taking their toll soon enough."

The voices faded, and Fasul thought himself to be alone until a faded face filled his vision.

"You're awake," the creature said, and Fasul recognized the voice as the Reclaimer that had struck him back in the temple.

"I had not intended to knock you unconscious," the Reclaimer said with some humility, "Its quite troublesome wearing these suits in battle, I often forget how much force I can exert. You have my apologies."

"Has Tch'enkyu fallen to the Half-Breed?" Fasul asked, groaning internally as his head throbbed. Even speaking carried a significant amount of pain.

"It has fallen to no one. It no longer exists," the Reclaimer responded bluntly, "We detonated an explosive that rendered the world inhabitable, and the Half-Breed destroyed it in a blind rage as we fled."

Fasul's eyes slid shut in remorse, his chest aching with grief over the planet's destruction. So much history, destroyed in passing, as if it signified nothing.

"You have an odd attachment to that planet," the Reclaimer commented, "May I inquire as to what that attachment is the result of?"

"You would not understand," Fasul retorted, breathing deeply as he reopened his eyes. The Reclaimer stared down at him with bemusement.

"That I would not understand why someone would be willing to throw their life away for an inanimate object...yes I would most certainly not understand that."

"The planet was the symbol of hope for my people, for myself. We've been reduced to unending flight from a menace that we created, forgoing all of our history and tradition so that we might survive for a short while longer. It was the last remaining ties to our old way of life, of course I would grieve for it's passing."

"That planet was nothing more than its name implies. A planet. Why would you form an emotional bond with something that could not return your feelings, and could never acknowledge what you have given it? It was a memory, nothing more. Hope does not come in the form of a planet."

"Then where shall we go for our hope? You? A warrior that prefers to flee rather than fight?" Fasul asked scathingly. The Reclaimer further aggravated Fasul when he let out a deep laugh at his question.

"Why must you turn to anything else for hope? Are you not alive? Do you not draw breath as we speak? Is that not enough hope for you?" the Reclaimer pursued, "You live! What better hope is that? There are billions of creatures in this universe that have met a fate worse than yours, yet you turn to something as ridiculous as a planet for your inspiration!? What kind of foolhardy creature are you?"

"How could someone gain hope from living like this? Nomads within a universe we once oversaw for millennia."

"Ignorant fool!" the Reclaimer shouted, and his face became reddened, "Did you forget already that you yourselves created this predicament? Why should the universe provide you with anything when you betrayed it and all the creatures it has spawned? Do you sit within your metal city, watching as civilization after civilization, planet after planet are sacrificed to the Half-Breed so that you may live, and offer nothing but your bitter little thoughts upon your own fate!? Are all of your people like this? My warriors fight and die so that your kind live! Draw your hope from that if you must. There are still others that are willing to die so that you may live!"

With his piece said, the Reclaimer stormed off, his face disappearing from Fasul vision, and eventually the sound of his footsteps followed suit.

Silence deafened the room, and Fasul struggled to lift his body. The movement caused his sight to blur once more, and sickness overwhelmed him suddenly. With a groan he fell back, and in a moment consciousness left him once again.

The sound of screaming woke him. Horrible, soul-wrenching screams. They echoed through the ship, eternally worse than the screams of the Half-Breed.

Fear flooded his veins, and Fasul forced himself out of the bunk-head. The sense of sickness filled him as his head moved, but it was far weaker than before. He struggled to hold back his bile, and clung to the walls as he headed for the door to the small quarters

he'd been situated in. Outside the door two directions awaited him. His head was pounding, but he could tell the screams were coming from the further end of the hallway, and he directed himself towards them.

The hallway bled into a much larger room, which also had a gravity lift that was activated. The sound of hurried voices were now mixed within the screams, and Fasul felt the cold sickness wash over him again. Stepping into the lift, he experienced the sensation of weightlessness for a few seconds before artificial ground made contact with his feet. The scene awaiting him drew a gasp from the Elder Majal.

The Reclaimers from before were lying upon the deck that the ship they'd travelled in was now settled upon. They'd been stripped of their armoured suits, and were now thrashing wildly, as if they were gripped by some unseen force. Seeing the creatures in the flesh allowed Fasul to observe what they actually looked like. A soft pigment coloured their skin, which appeared to be quite soft. They possessed the same distinguishing sexual organs that the Majal and most other species did, the females adorned with breasts as well. They were not altogether unlike the Majal themselves, at least in regards to genetic makeup.

Surrounding the Reclaimers were several other Majal, each attempting to administer some form of aid to the screaming victims.

"Administer the anaesthetics but for God's sake don't go over the dosage amount!" an authoritative voice shouted off to the side. A wizened Majal stood, arms crossed, watching the horrifying, frenzied scene with not a hint of emotion on his face. As if feeling Fasul's eyes upon him, the Majal looked over and motioned for him to approach.

"Those damn Reclaimers always make a mess of everything," the wizened Majal remarked as Fasul neared, "I didn't expect them to bring back any stragglers."

"What's wrong with them?" Fasul asked. The other Majal had managed to do something that calmed the Reclaimers down, though their bodies still involuntarily twitched violently every few seconds.

"None of your business."

"Considering I was rescued by those creatures, and I now find them to be in catatonic states, I find myself disagreeing with you there," Fasul spoke, his voice like gravel, "Now, what is wrong with them?"

"Figures they'd bring back one of the few of you that still had a backbone," the elder remarked wryly. His mannerisms surprised Fasul. It was Majal custom to speak politely and in a more established prose, but the elder was gruff and crude. He acted as if just by existing Fasul was an annoyance to him.

"I don't know how much you managed to see on Tch'enkyu before fleeing, but do those creatures look like they would be able to go toe-to-toe with a Half-Breed and live to talk about it?" the elder snarled, waving a hand in the general direction of the naked Reclaimers.

As uncultured as he was, the elder did have a point. The Reclaimers appeared weak as they were now, their bodies toned, yet fragile. A Half-Breed could likely tear them apart without a second thought.

"Those suits they were wearing are like a second body. Speed, strength, reflexes, even intelligence; they're all affected by the combat suit. With the suits, they can fight the Half-Breed and survive long enough to kill a few of them, and in this instance with the use of a little strategy, they killed a whole lot of them."

"Incredible," Fasul breathed, "Why haven't we employed them in greater number? We could actually battle the Half-Breed..."

"Such an incredible idea! Surely us poor old fools that sit upon the council that governs our course through this universe, could use such brilliance. Did you already forget what was waiting for you once you decided to come down that lift?" the elder asked sarcastically, "The amount of stress those suits place on the bodies of these Reclaimers is tremendous. The longer they're in them, and the more they fight, the greater the strain. There was a hell of a lot more than eight of these creatures when we first started. Over two-thirds of the subjects break down after being in the suits for longer than a few minutes. These eight are the only ones that have survived. As powerful as they are, against the Half-Breeds' numbers they represent nothing more than a slight resistance. An annoyance at best."

Fasul begrudgingly admitted the Elder had a point. Though it was impossible to know the actual number of Half-Breeds that walked within the universe, their number was far greater than the number of Majal that still lived.

Thirty years of fleeing, and occasional fighting had depleted the Majal, spiritually and physically. There was no talk of eventual victory within the halls of their city, only the look of a race that had given up hope. Submitted to a fate that they could not avoid.

"Why did we turn to this species for protection?" Fasul asked. "Could we have not used our own forces?"

"The Reclaimers possess the ability to evolve further, into something greater than they are now," the wizened Majal spoke, "Our time is nearly up in this universe. No matter what we may do, to strive against the Half-Breed will inevitably prove too costly for the remaining life that persists. So long as we exist, so shall the Half-Breed."

>"What do you mean? 'Our time is nearly up'? You make it sound as if..."<p>

Fasul trailed off, as the elder had turned a heated gaze upon him. The smoldering intensity told Fasul that he was pursuing a topic that would be best left alone.

The Reclaimers had been placed upon transportable medical tables, and were being carted off from the docking station. Fasul watched them leave, his mind filled with countless questions about the Reclaimers, the Half-Breed, the war, and the meaning of the elder's

words.

"You'll be assigned new quarters," the Elder spoke, "There will be containment protocols enacted, and you will have restrictions placed on where you move throughout this floating city. Anyone that you were in contact with before this day, will be informed that you did not return from Tch'enkyu."

"So I'm now a prisoner?" Fasul asked.

"We are all prisoners. What is one more freedom taken away at this point?" the Elder asked sardonically.

"What will happen to the Reclaimers? Can they possibly be healed?"

"They won't die just yet. Their bodies may appear weak, but their spirit can surpass the limitations of flesh."

The elder left him then, and Fasul was alone. The thought of being a prisoner within the only city left to the Majal did not concern him. He had been a ghost upon the ship for over thirty years, and no one would miss his presence, or notice that he no longer existed. Gan Ful may enquire to his fate, but with a short explanation from those above him, he would accept Fasul's death without another word.

It was the Reclaimers that clouded Fasul's thoughts. They were an intelligent species, capable of learning and understanding the speech of the Majal, and also capable of incredible feats of strength. Adaptive and bipedal, they were a species worth cultivating, and monitoring. Why then, would the Majal willingly use them as fodder for the war against the Half-Breed? Such a course of action went against every grain of foundation that the Majal culture was built upon.

Has desperation given birth to this way of thought?

Worry gnawed at Fasul, his body tense yet unmoving.

Yet he did not give thought nor voice to his earlier desire for death.

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Who is it that makes the distinction between good and evil? What manner of creature has the judgement to decide when intent changes from innocence and slides into immorality?

There is no one entity that can decide, and there has never existed a situation of true evil, or true goodness. Motives and desire influence everything. It is the majority that decides, but what happens when the majority is kept in the dark? When the decisions for an entire populace are made by a select few? Well-intentions become twisted. Hope changes to hate. The desire for survival clouds a mind from thought. Sacrifice for a greater good becomes commonplace. Since when is sacrifice accepted?

Hubris had overtaken them. They believed themselves to control the universe, and to be the overseers of all life. Arrogance and lust birthed their unfortunate fate. Such that they could not see now that

they were the architects of their own destruction.

The exalted status of their previous lives made their new existence that much harder to bear. These creatures that controlled the fate of their people, they were not concerned with their past duties. Caring for the cultivation of the universe, this no longer factored into their decisions. Planets and species were sacrificed, surrendered to their pursuers in order to buy them time to flee. Civilizations fought against the sudden onslaught of an unknown enemy, and ultimately fell under the relentless attack of creatures determined to consume all life.

There has never been a truly altruistic force in the universe, but there has also never been anything truly evil. Even amongst those that saw survival as their only concern, there were those in positions of power and authority that understood. They had sinned by living. Even if they were to run endlessly, there would come a day that they would be caught. There could not be an endless chase. It would end one day.

Knowing their death, these creatures began to seek ways to preserve what remained of the universe. It had been their duty once, after all.

Consultations, ruminations, and finally creations were carried out. In the darkness of space, the plans that would end the lives of the Majal were made.

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**Grifen've (Floating City), Inner Sanctum of the Elders**

**Yontu K'syk (Fortieth year of the Lost History)**

**13:64 (Simulated time whilst aboard the Floating City)**

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"So its come to this then has it?"

The room currently holding the few Majal responsible for the governing of their entire species was not as grandiose as one would expect. A small square room with bright lighting that illuminated the plain walls and colourless floor, contained no more than the door leading inside and a table designed for no more than five or six individuals.

"What more could we do? Every conceivable option has been considered, simulated, and rejected. This is the lone plan that would allow this universe some form of survival."

"We will be committing a crime that none shall forget, nor forgive."

"I am ill at ease to think that we would all so quickly jump to the conclusion that our suicide should be the saviour of all living sentients."

The quibbling voices continued their discontent until a lone hand was raised and the attention of those gathered shifted from their fear.

"It is more than understood that this is a plan none would have ever believed might be carried out," spoke the lone voice untouched by panic. "There is however, a genuine consensus that our species has fought this war far longer than we should have ever done so. Countless people have been sacrificed, and we are to blame. Not the Half Breed, nor the Reclaimers. We stand alone in this respect.

"The installations have been constructed for this purpose. Do not delude yourself for one moment and believe that we have deceived our people, or each other. An inevitability has come to pass, and there should be no surprise. We are doing what is right."

A silence passed, and those that spoke of their fears stared helplessly at the cold complexity of the simple tabletop.

"We have committed crimes that no one will forgive, that is indeed correct. This remaining time we have been granted must be spent remembering that we were once the overseer's of this universe, and betrayal took over our actions once fear touched our hearts. This will be the first time in many years that we will once again take up our old mantle. We will act in the best interest of this universe, and not our own self-serving actions. I can think of no greater task that our fallen people can ever hope to accomplish."

The wizened words flowed deep into each of the Majal, and massaged away the halting fear gripping their minds. Slowly their eyes lifted from the table, and they looked one another in the eye for the first time. In the gaze of each Majal, they could see everything that they wished to see in themselves.

One final act to redeem the Majal.

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**Penuy Den (Capula Sector)**

**Unnamed Planet**

**Error.**

Fasul had never felt the fear that now twisted its way through his limbs, seemingly halting each and every step forward he sought. Short, vicious battles were waged each moment his legs carried him forward as the desire to flee back towards his transport craft flared brightly. Floating high above the ruined city he walked towards was a fleet of ships that looked menacing even from this great distance.

I am walking into the very arms of death, but before I can embrace that caring visage I will be torn apart and mutilated by the Half Breed.

He could not remember how long it had been since Cyriacus had left him. The enraged Reclaimer had raced towards the burning capital, the home of his dead wife and child. There was little commotion amongst the destruction already enacted upon the buildings and countryside.

As Fasul had stood and watched for that unknown length of time, he had not seen anything that indicated Cyriacus was carrying out the revenge he had sought.

Though he knew better, Fasul held tightly to the brief hope that Cyriacus still lived, and that the Half Breed were returning to their waiting fleet. No greater wish could have been granted than for him to see his friend once again.

He forced his mind off the looming city, and instead meandered towards the news he had come to deliver to the wife and child of his friend. The Halo Installations were to be fired. The Majal would perish and aside from a small assortment of selected planets and species, all life in the universe would be eradicated. This would result in the Half Breed and the Flood starving. The plague would finally be eliminated.

A great debate had arisen amongst those Majal whom felt they deserved some say in the matter, about which planets and species to save from the undiscerning reach of Halo, and in the end less than a dozen planets were imbued with a Sanctuary. Of those chosen, no greater planet had Fasul striven to save was that of the Reclaimers. Many felt they knew too much, and the Half Breed might find their home world some day. But their service to the Majal was rewarded in the end, and Fasul had been in transit to deliver the news and arrange for the Reclaimer's safe transit home when the Half Breed struck.

The few defences around the planet were eradicated by the superior firepower of the enemy fleet, and before any evacuations could have hoped to begin, the Flood were released. Fasul had managed to remain undetected, and sent word to Cyriacus, who was returning to that very planet after defending some other Majal strongholds in the sector. It was not long before the Reclaimer returned.

Ruined buildings now surrounded Fasul as he stepped inside the city, the lone living Majal left on the entire planet. It was a rare moment, punctuated by the heat and the flames. The silence felt audible as he walked, and his fear grew stronger as he saw the growing signs of the Flood.

Turning down a large street he encountered several Flood infectious forms, but he paid them no mind as they leapt at him, their weak bodies exploding with a sickening squish as they were repelled by his personal energy shielding.

The Flood grew more and more common as he went, until he finally encountered the first signs of the Half Breed. Their sickening twisted moans and guttural growls, the very same he had heard the night his child had been torn apart before his very eyes as she was transformed. The urge to vomit gripped him as his stomach grew heavy. Sweat singed his eyes and the skin along his body tightened.

A fool I am for coming this far! A greater fool I must be for continuing on, and the greatest fool I will always be for not stopping even as the Half Breed loom near.

His thoughts were punctuated as he passed through the lumbering wreckage of several nearby buildings. They were the homes of Majal, and their blood stained upon the ground he walked upon was not

unfamiliar to him.

There were perhaps a hundred Half Breed standing only thirty feet from Fasul. He could not say accurately for the road was an incline and he could not see past the main huddled mass of them. They were gathered as if staring intently at something further ahead of them, and even though it could have very well been anything Fasul knew exactly what it was.

My God Cyriacus. I hope that you are with Chrysanthe now.

Fasul did not remain undetected for long, as his scent was quickly picked up by the Half Breed standing along the outlying circle of Half Breed.

"We missed one!" cried one of the twisted creatures that once looked no different than Fasul.

"It would be a shame to leave a survivor, but I couldn't stand to lose the splendid taste of the Reclaimer to the rancid filth of a Pure Blood."

"There is no need for devouring friend, we will simply tear the insipid cretin apart and let the Flood have him."

The taunts and jeers echoed loudly in Fasul's ears and he fought vainly to stop the trembling that threatened to retain all of his forward movement. After a visible battle he continued on, and the Half Breed became uproarious.

"He walks towards us! The fool cannot wait for his own death."

"The fear in him is so strong that you can smell it, maybe I will have but a little taste of his flesh."

"Do you think he might be delirious, and that to him we appear as the comforting group of friends that we've devoured?"

As he continued forward a lone Half Breed stepped forward and with no hesitation raised his mangled arm and struck Fasul with a great force. The expected result was not reached however, as Fasul's shielding absorbed the strike and the Half Breed was repelled backward, its pock-marked skin scorched where it had touched Fasul.

"The scum is hiding behind a shield!" screamed the Half Breed while it nursed it's wounded limb.

"Then we shall count the number of strikes it takes before we break through, and then we shall see how long it will take until we tear all the skin from his flesh!" cried another.

A group advanced on him, and with their simultaneous blows Fasul was knocked to the ground, his shield collapsing and disappearing with a whimpering flash. As the group prepared to lash again at his prone body, a strong voice cut a swath through the burning air.

"Stop!"

The voice carried a commanding tone that was discernible even through the twisted tongue of the Half Breed, and the group assaulting Fasul recoiled immediately.

Not waiting to see what creature spoke to the gathered monsters, Fasul rose unsteadily to his feet and walked forward, not meeting the gaze of the Half Breed that loomed around him. They stepped away quickly, granting him a sight of what they had all been gathered around. There upon the ground was the armour of a Reclaimer. It was stained with blood both red and black. No sign of the man that once wore the suit remained.

That blood, so simple and unseeming belied the pain it arose. It was the blood of the Majal, the blood of their hope, their hubris, their pain, and their fear. Already dried and flaking, it stood above the armour it rested upon acting as the contrast to that pristine whiteness.

With no pretence of grace Fasul fell upon the spot of a Reclaimer's death, his trembling hands seeking out a piece of the mangled suit. The moment he touched that molded material it was as if the universe had collapsed around him, and there could not be another moment in history. Time stopped, and everything else was lost. All that could reach Fasul was the voice of a friend he had lost.

"You've shamed yourself, and your race Fasul," said the twisted voice of a nearby Half-Breed.

"There are no need for words at this point my old friend," said Enorym, as what passed for a smile graced his twisted face. Fasul, who was at a loss for words regardless, remained silent.

"I had heard rumour that you were still alive. I must admit I held a desire in my heart to see you once again, before the end."

Fasul noticed absently that the other Half-Breed seemed to regard Enorym with something pertaining to respect, or adoration. They had ceased their taunts and promises of violence at the moment of Enorym's speaking. Swallowing past the thick lump in his throat, Fasul found his voice, while still clinging tightly to the remnants of Cyriacus' armor.

"I had not thought it possible for your kind to possess anything resembling a heart."

That same twisted smile fell across Enorym's face.

"Now now, there is no need for any insulting jabs at this point. We are two old friends meeting under interesting circumstances, a rarity amongst our people in these times." Enorym cast a scathing look down at the armour Cyriacus had once worn, now clutched within Fasul's grasp. "You may relinquish that creatures shell, clinging to the past is something that I'm sure you've grown past in these times."

"He was my friend," Fasul said, "And he gave me my life. I will never let go of him."

"I am offering you a rare opportunity Fasul, I hold enough power amongst my kind, that I could protect you, until you have undergone the change to become one of us. This is no simple offer, I am willing

to give you life rather than death, surely that is a greater gift than what that creature could ever have given you."

"Protecting what you can, and living with the understanding that death will come when it comes," Fasul smiled sadly, "No one could ever give me more than that. I made my choice many years ago Enorym, and my mind has not changed. I reject everything that you can give me."

"Kill the fool, Enorym!" one of the many other Half-Breed shouted. The outburst was followed by a chorus of similar opinions by the remaining warriors.

"You've thrown away survival then," Enorym said, as the others fell silent, "And I can do no more to protect you. Stay in the past then, and when you pull your head from the sand, you will see that the universe is no more what you remember, and you will die because of it."

"So be it," Fasul spoke, "I will die as I am; die as my family did. I am a Majal, and that will never change."

"I wish I could tell you that you might regret this decision, but I could not utter such a falsity," Enorym said slowly. "You Pure Blood's wish to wipe the universe clean of all its occupants through your precious Halo network. This will be a waste. We've no use for those that will be eliminated by the blast those structures might create. Even this great sacrifice cannot save the Majal."

So the Half Breed knew about the Halo installations, that fact seemed of little consequence to Fasul. Behind the facade that those of higher authority might proclaim, the real purpose of activating Halo was to wipe clean the existence of the Majal.

We have deemed ourselves to be hazards to the universe itself, and for once we shall take up our role as the overseers of a universe. This hazard will be dealt with.

"Leave the fool to wail over his prized pet," Enorym spoke to the gathered throngs of Half Breed. As if a switch had suddenly been flicked the mob turned and dispersed, leaving Enorym standing above the still kneeling Fasul.

A thousand words flew between them suddenly, and in that instance they came to understand each other with greater clarity than when they had both walked the streets of their home world together.

"I can still hear their voices. They will be with me no matter the outcome."

"Goodbye my friend. Perhaps this war will end once the Majal slit their own throats, but I will hold out hope that we might meet once more."

The parting words offered seemed as if they left from both Majal, the fallen and the twisted. Nothing more passed between either, and Fasul was left alone to mourn his saviour and his friend.

The abandoned research facility thrummed with the busy activity of scheduled tests and an unchanging source of energy that would continue even as the universe was purged of all its occupants.

Fasul watched stoically from his placement above the prone body that he had once inhabited. The purge from his body had been a simple procedure, and he had felt not even a twinge of pain as his body was rendered directionless. An empty husk that would serve no further purpose and in a short time would have every cell shredded. The installations had yet to fire, but the moment was soon. The remaining Reclaimers were carrying out their final mission.

His mind turned to the child he had delivered to the trembling arms of a Reclaimer upon their home world. The seed of Cyriacus and Chrysanthe had lived through the destruction of a Half Breed army, protected by the sacrifice of her parents. From the burning embers of a crushed city did Fasul retrieve the frightened infant. The pain of losing his friend was numbed at this discovery, for Fasul now possessed a purpose. The child would live, and so would he. The guardian of that child, and of the Reclaimer species.

A tremendous flash of light raced through the research facility, and Fasul watched silently as his body twitched violently for a moment before ceasing to move. It was dead. That witnessed death was the first of an incomprehensible amount.

Fasul sacrificed his mortality for the Reclaimers, the one value he had clung to desperately for so long. He would be their guiding force. They would grow strong, and they would be prepared to fight the Half Breed should they ever meet.

For now, he would wait.

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****Author's Notes: I got this one out pretty quick huh everyone? Sometimes I outdo myself.****

****Wait please! Don't leave! And please put down that large fillet knife. I beg of you, no killing!****

****This chapter jumps around quite a bit, its not all happening in the same time frame. Sorry for the jumbledness of everything, but it is Fasul's memories after all. The dude's like a billion years old. He's got quadruple Alzheimers.****

****Yes, I know this has been an incredibly, indiscernible amount of time. So much has likely happened to all of you, and I assure you I as well have gone through quite a many things (I climbed a mountain). Heck, Halo 3 came out and its time has passed. I don't play video games as much anymore, part of falling in love and moving out with your girlfriend and suddenly being completely independent of everyone you'd once depended on.****

****Anyhoo, less about me, more about this story. I cannot make any promises, but I want to try and come back. I've written tons of stuff for my own personal works, but always somewhere in the back of my small capricious mind I couldn't forget about this. I honestly think that if I'm ever to move on into the real writing world, I'll have to finish this story once and for all. Once again, I don't know for sure**

if this is going to happen, but I'm definitely going to try. I can only ask that you all maybe give me one last opportunity to do this.**

Let me know how many of you are still around, either in the reviews or on the Bungie forums. Geez I'll try and find that thread to see if it hasn't been deleted yet.

Next Chapter: No more of this Majal/Forerunner garbage. Back to the Arbiter/Aonlum, Cortana, Keyes, Johnson. All those wacky fellas.

End
file.